The Prince's Uprising

A Savanaclaw Fan Zine

THANK YOU

TPU

Hey, we want to thank you for wanting to take a look at our zine. All of our contributors worked very hard in creating art and fanfics that mirrors our love and appreciation for the Savanaclaw boys. We hope that our zine resonates with you as well. Thanks again for your support. Also, a big thank you to all the mods who initiated this project and to all of our beautiful contributors who brought it to life.

HEAD MOD	Soru
MOD 2	Glidia
MOD 3	Nettles
MOD 4	Azul
DESIGN & LAYOUT	Nurnimm

JACK
LEONA
RUGGIE

BEAT PREFECT'S SHIT IN LEONA

By Alestra

Leona found himself surrounded by darkness. Nothing but a mirror stood before him. With little else he could do, he walked up to it, noting the black ink drops decorating the bronze frame and more alarmingly, the lack of his reflection.

As his hand hovered cautiously over the frame, its surface rippled for a moment, before an ink-stained arm reached out to grab him, sharp claws digging deep into his skin in the process. Growling instinctively, he tried to summon his Unique Magic but realised three things; firstly, his magic pen was missing. Second; it was as if any magical ability he had was being blocked, much akin to Riddle's 'Off With Your Head'.

And finally, that thing that dared attack him looked just a little *too* uncomfortably similar to him, if he was more inky and evil-looking.

"Tch," the reflection mused. "Is that really how you say hello to someone on your side? And quit that futile attempt to retaliate. Magic will not reach where we are."

"Who are you?" Leona spat, narrowing his eyes. "What do you want?"

At his question, the impostor in the mirror laughed. "How boring. Did you become more idiotic after your defeat?"

"I'm you," his inky Overblot reflection stated, pulling itself out of its mirror confines to meet Leona face-to-face, his wicked grin revealing razor-sharp teeth. "And I'm here to unlock your potential."

"You could be king one day. But your current pathetic state? No. Not like this. So I come with an offer. Accept me, and you will get everything you ever wanted."

Now, Leona was ambitious, not stupid. He had a generally healthy sense of danger, and it sure as hell was sounding off alarms in his head right now.

"No. I still remember what happened at the Spelldrive competition. I still remember the damage. What *you* did."

His other self laughed uproariously. "Damage? Since when did you care about damage to reach the throne? How ridiculous. You didn't care about such a thing when you tried to trample that overgrown lizard Malleus."

Hold on. This dialogue felt familiar, almost as if someone had spoken it before-

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"I saw you with a cute little lion cub after the tournament," the Prefect mentioned, seemingly waiting for Leona outside his dorm room. They were smiling, though Leona could sense something felt...off. "Do you like him?"

Leona decided to keep it short and curt. "Cheka's a little brat, and a general pain in the ass. What do you think?"

The Prefect simply hummed and nodded. “I see...so you don’t like him.”

“Oi. We let you crash in Savanaclaw while that cephalopunk wrapped his tentacles around your building. And now, you’re waitin’ for me, asking weird questions. What are you gettin’ at?” He asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

The Prefect was unfazed by Leona’s tone, brushing it off. “You want to be King, yes?” They asked suddenly, their eyes meeting Leona’s gaze. Even though Leona needed no magic to prove his strength and the Prefect was well, magicless, Leona felt a shiver run through him. This conversation was a little too similar to meetings with foreign ambassadors who weren’t particularly on amicable terms with Afterglow Savannah. It almost felt like talking to Azul or Jade sly and shady, hinting but never outright saying until the deal was struck. The only thing was Azul was at least somewhat predictable; having a business and a background helped Leona guess Azul’s intent. Prefect was a nobody, with no major prior history Leona knew of to predict their moves. And that vulnerability of not knowing was shaping to be a disturbing factor to Leona.

“Very much so.”

“More than anything else in the world?”

“Herbivore,” he growled in warning, “be direct.”

“Well, you had no qualms in tearing down the Diasomnia team and its dorm leader during the tournament to become the top team. But you don’t show that same conniving, sly brilliance in pursuing the throne. If you really want to be King-” the Prefect pursed their lips.

“-then you’d have framed or killed your brother and nephew for it. Just like how you tried to weaken the other dorm teams, or kill Ruggie. It’s not like you’re above such a thing.”

At that Leona’s blood ran cold. Did this brazen little herbivore just-?

“Aren’t I right?” The prefect asked again, their mocking eyes boring right into Leona. “They’re standing in your way of the crown. You could kill them somehow or create a scandal to make the people turn against him. But you haven’t.”

“Prefect, if you value your life-”

“So, it’s one of two things,” they continued on. “You don’t really value the crown, or you’re too much of a coward to get it.”

That fucker. Leona growled, punching his hand into the wall, just next to the prefect’s head. “Listen here, you little shit. I give you refuge in my dorm-”

“Ooh. Did I hit a sore spot?” They taunted, faking innocent accidental realisation at Leona’s outrage. “Or are you too scared to face what you need to do for the crown? Maybe that’s why you were held back.”
The Prefect laughed in amazement, not giving Leona room to retort as their voice got louder. “Wow, who would’ve thought! Leona the coward! Leona, the one who’s too scared to do *whatever he has to do* to get the crown he so desires, so he plays ruler to a bunch of rowdy idiots-”

That’s fucking it. Leona roars, and the Prefect finds themselves unable to breathe as Leona’s hand wraps around their throat. They can feel the way the air dries instantly, as if being deprived of moisture. Their skin starts to chafe, the outer layer of their skin turning into fine sand that falls from their neck. Still, that cocky smirk never fades from their face.

“Last chance, *weak herbivore*. Don’t challenge a ruler when you have nothing.”

"Pfft..! See? You're capable of killing. You *can* be king, but not without dirtying your hands." the prefect's voice sounded strange now, as if overlapped by a darker, huskier voice.

"Now, I want to see with your actions, Second Prince Leona Kingscholar. Will you let fate trample you, or will you overturn your outdated traditions of your kingdom's ascension and rise up?"

The surroundings seemed to distort around Leona his eyes widened as half of the Prefect's face started to melt off and deform, turning into inky black liquid that started to latch and move up his arms. Disgusted and aghast, Leona hurriedly threw what was once the Prefect and backed away, the vision of Savanaclaw dorm fading back into the inky darkness as a pair of firm arms languidly rested themselves on his shoulders. From behind him, he hears his voice whisper into his ear.

"I think the time for the Prince's uprising is long overdue for us, Leona Kingscholar."

KING OF THE CLOUDS

By Shu, Art by Puo

Black ink spilled from every corner of his mouth. Fast to reach the ground but impossible to dissolve, the dark liquid burned everything it touched, tearing through his skin and numbing everything inside.

Leona knew very well what this was. He'd seen the face of his own ghost every day in his dreams, even wished for it to take him away sometimes. And now, reflecting his face on the pool of blot between his feet, that creature looked back at him.

“Housewarden Leona, I want you to know... I only came to this school because of how much I admired you! What happened to the man you used to be?" Someone said, but Leona couldn’t remember neither their face nor their name anymore.

Haven’t they learned their lesson already? Even after being granted a chance to make things right, Leona still chose to turn his back on everyone who looked up to him.

“...”

Nothing but the mirror’s voice and Leona’s heels clacking against the floor could be heard in the student-filled room. It had only taken the mention of his name to make everyone quiet down. Countless, curious eyes followed him as he stepped forward to have his dorm assigned.

Despite having no interest in participating in such an old-fashioned and stigmatizing tradition, Leona felt relief knowing he’d spend the next four years in the only dorm worth his admiration, Savanaclaw.

Under different circumstances, the lion beastman would’ve probably been allowed to appreciate that moment for a little longer without having to concern himself with anything else. In this reality, though, the pressure of having the judging eyes of all those strangers on the back of his neck reminded him a bit too much of what he felt like every time he showed his face in public back in his hometown which made him want to run away.

It wouldn’t be another hour until the ceremony came to an end. Thankfully, as soon as Leona had joined his new dormmates and quietly tried to blend himself in with the rest, people had decided to move onto something else and leave him alone. Even so, the feeling that he was being watched was never entirely gone.

Heartslabyul students were the first ones to leave the room, paving the way for Savanaclaw to follow. Even after being called to the front, Leona still hadn’t managed to get a glimpse at his so-called “leader’s" appearance–the long hoods of their ceremonial robes made it difficult to make out anyone’s face, after all–so he tried to keep an eye out in case said person showed up.

It wasn’t too long before the person in question finally revealed himself and joined their side. Although, despite having responsibilities to take care of and a group of students impatiently waiting for his command, the boy simply didn’t bother to look at anyone else as he made his way straight to where Leona was.

“Kingscholar! What a pleasant surprise to meet you here of all places," The boy spoke with a wide smile on his face.

The housewarden’s voice was oddly familiar and, just by taking a better look at him, Leona concluded it was probably due to how well-

acquainted he was with his species. Bird beastmen were all the same, after all. The colors in their hair resembled the sunset itself, feathers would grow from their skin at will and, most importantly, their voices were as melodious as a bird's song.

Unfortunately, Leona had met plenty of them in the past.

"Um, housewarden Fahari? The rest of the students are waiting for us,"A second person interrupted him.

Something stirred inside Leona the moment that name was pronounced. It had been many years since he'd last heard anything about that person, but it would take an entire lifetime to forget about him.

"Is that so?" The housewarden, Fahari, rolled his eyes, "I'm sorry Leona, but we'll have to leave this conversation for another moment, it seems. I do hope you enjoy your time in Savanaclaw."

Leona's stomach turned at the sound of his name coming out of his lips but decided to keep a blank face in front of them. Things were just getting started, after all.

"..."

His first week at the academy was a blur. Falling asleep was easier to do during lectures than it was in the small bedroom he was forced to share with two of the most noisy people he'd ever met after his nephew. And, even if he made the effort to stay awake, the subjects were all too simple and the teachers too bad at teaching them to catch his interest.

Rules were rules, though. Despite his efforts to persuade the school's headmage into granting him some benefits, the man had insisted that everyone must learn the same things and share the same experiences as the rest. He'd only hesitated when a large sum of money was offered but, after giving it a second thought, the answer still remained a solid no.

Joining the ranks as a housewarden or vice-housewarden was the only exception to that rule. Leona failed to see why the school and everyone outside of it held such an unfair system in high regard, but he also couldn't deny that the benefits that came along with becoming a leader were rather convenient.

Besides, he had to find a way to get Fahari out of his case.

According to the rumors Leona heard from people inside and outside of Savanaclaw, the feathered boy had a bad habit of pushing others to their physical and mental limits until they no longer had the will to fight back anymore. Considering the history they shared together it was hard for the lion to be surprised by any of it, though. Ever since they were young, Fahari had always used his family's money and influence to step on the weak and walk out unscathed.

By no means was Leona any better than him. As far as he was concerned, the fact that such a large group of capable and powerful mages couldn't stand up against one spoiled brat meant they weren't worth so much. People with a weak sense of resolve were destined to become someone else's pawn, after all.

As a child, he couldn't have known better than those people though. Only to be a good son and a good prince, abide by the rules and hide his pain from others to avoid being a burden. But things were very different

now, and he would not let anyone step on him and scar his body for the sake of protecting a fake peace anymore.

The weather was heavy and humid with a sky full of clouds looming above them that day. Even though Leona would've preferred to spend a day like that sleeping, he still forced himself to show up to the first spelldrive practice of the year hoping it would only be a short meeting to test the newcomer's skills and assign them to their new positions.

Even after checking out a few options, the spelldrive team was still the only one he considered worthy of his time and effort. It's not as if Leona actually intended to go all out for a school club, though. But at the very least he wouldn't get bored out of his mind while trying to spend as much time away from his dorm leader as possible.

But things rarely came out as planned for him.

As soon as he was done changing into his gym clothes, Leona joined the rest of the students in the field just in time for the introductions. The first person he laid his eyes on was the white haired boy standing in front of everyone that he'd recognized from the dorm assignment ceremony as Diasomnia's housewarden.

Much to his surprise, the boy introduced himself as the club's leader. Although Leona had no reason to doubt his skills, he still found it interesting that someone with such a frail complexion had managed to overshadow his peers from Savanaclaw. But before he could dwell on it any further, his attention was turned to the boy standing right next to him and an amused smirk tugged at the corner of his lips.

Neither of the students around him seemed to share his feeling, though. And, while the fact that Fahari was second to the team's leader was amusing enough to make him want to laugh, Leona agreed with the rest that the circumstances ruined what could've been a very good joke. Because this also meant he'd have to see his face every day after school as well.

Soon enough, the introductions were over and the captain asked everyone to find someone to pair up for the warm-up. Although many people had already asked Leona to be their partner, the lion only had one person in mind that would suit the job well. For this was the best chance he'd get to measure just how good Fahari actually was.

"Let's pair up," Leona approached the dorm leader, earning himself many curious glances in the process.

"Kingscholar? What a surprise to have you on the same team," Fahari showed him a forged smile, "Sure, I'd love to play a game with my old friend. It will be just like the old days."

"Hah, like the old days you say? Unfortunately for you, I'm nothing like the scrawny cub I was back then," Leona scoffed.

"Is that so? I hope you can entertain me better this time, then."

There was a brief moment before the team's captain gave the starting signal in which the two of them tried to measure up each other's potential. But Leona was only using that opportunity to create a distraction. While his opponent was busy putting on a show to intimidate him, the lion grabbed his broom and took off to the sky to gain an advantage over him.

Before Fahari could even get a hold of his broom, Leona shot his first pass at him, not caring if the other would make it in time to dodge it, and smiled. Although the dorm leader tried to hide his annoyance with a smile of his own, it was evident from the amount of force he'd put into his spell that his plan to get him riled up had worked as intended. Leona knew better than to let himself get carried away this early on though, so he avoided getting too confident just yet.

Except for the Diasomnia housewarden, who was in charge of overseeing the entire training, all of the other members had chosen to keep a safe distance from the pair, figuring it was best to not find out what lengths

they were capable of reaching. Leona wasn't worried about it, though. Just like everything about him, his unstable temperament had remained unchanged since childhood and thus it made it easier to predict his next moves.

"I'm impressed that you decided to approach me first,"Fahari yelled from his corner of the field.

"Why? You weren't expecting a decent opponent, perhaps?"

"Hardly so. I simply didn't think you'd want to play with me again after the way things ended last time."

Leona did not expect him to remember any faces or names other than his own so he was shocked to see he still remembered something from such a long time ago.

"Sorry, I tend to forget meaningless stuff so I dunno what you're talkin' about," Leona shrugged.

"And here I believed that scar in your face wouldn't let you forget. Ah, but it must be hard having to keep track of so many things as the king's assistant," Fahari laughed.

"You should be happier that it's not me you'll be sucking up to for the rest of your life, Fahari."

Just as those words left his mouth, Leona caught the disk in his hands and prepared to make his next pass before he was interrupted by their club leader calling for everyone to return back to the ground. There was no need for him to see what kind of reaction Fahari was making to know he'd succeeded at hurting his pride, even so, Leona made sure he got a glimpse of his face as a memory of that moment before descending from the air and leaving him behind.

"..."

Things remained eerily quiet within the dorm's halls for several days after that. The two barely ran into each other and, even when they did, Fahari treated him with the same amount of discontent as anyone else.

Even so,

"What on earth do you think you are doing?"

Leona was suddenly woken up from his nap when he heard a familiar voice yelling in the distance. The first thing he noticed upon opening his eyes was that he was not in his bedroom but in Savanaclaw's lounge instead. Judging from the soreness in his body, he must've been asleep for a good while before that.

"H-housewarden Fahari..." One of the students sitting in a nearby chair replied, his face white as snow.

"I'm sorry, housewarden. It was an accident–"

"Shut up, there's no need to act like a wet kitten. You all should have some more pride," Fahari replied.

At this point of the conversation, Leona couldn't keep his curiosity to himself anymore. Leaving only one of his eyes open, the lion took a glimpse around the room and noticed that the group of freshmen being scolded all held cards in their hands and were sitting around a table with multiple cups in it. Most of them were full except for one that had been spilled all over the carpet.

"Do you plan to keep sleeping, Kingscholar?"

All of a sudden, the housewarden had turned his attention to him and left the group of students behind as he walked closer to where he was seated.

"Not if you keep breaking my ears with that voice," Leona said with an irritated scowl.

“What did you just say?!"

“Tch, what do you even want from me?.”

“You can't sleep here, this is not your bedroom.”

Leona frowned.

“Must've missed the memo. Last I checked this was a common area to relax.”

“Exactly, and seeing you sleep so ungracefully is disturbing the others," Fahari said.

“I think it's having to deal with having your cranky ass here that's ruining their fun," Leona scoffed.

Pure venom spilled from the housewarden’s mouth as he clenched his fists to the side of his body.

“You'll regret disrespecting me like that, Kingscholar."

“Is that a threat?" The room went cold with those words.

“Don't act so arrogant with me. Your status means nothing here.”

“Hah, you must think very highly of yourself for holding that hollow title.”

It was only a matter of time before their argument became the center of attention in the entire dorm. Even though nobody did anything to stop them, it was too evident that neither of them wanted to be interrupted either.

That's why nobody did anything to stop Fahari from taking things a step further when he grew tired of yelling; Without taking his eyes off of Leona, the bird beastman reached for one of the full cups from the table and began to spill all of its contents onto the carpet.

“Clean it," He demanded.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me just fine.”

“Why on earth should I clean this up?!" Leona growled.

“As your punishment for talking back to your leader," Fahari stated with a firm voice.

There was no point arguing with him. The boy was quick to leave the room before Leona could get another word in.

But even though the other freshmen offered to clean it up as an apology for getting him involved in that mess, Leona wouldn't let such an humiliation slide.

Only two days went by before Leona was called into the housewarden’s room without any explanations. At this point, he was no longer hoping nor longing for things to go smoothly with Fahari, and thus he didn’t even bother trying to avoid the unavoidable.

“No need to be so anxious," Fahari spoke, pointing his gaze at Leona’s hand, “Just consider this a lesson from your senior.

The lion’s hand had remained close to the pocket where he kept his magical pen all the way through. Even though he doubted Fahari would try anything funny where everyone could hear them, Leona was not the type who’d walk into the dragon’s mouth and hope to not get burned.

“I’d never take a lesson from someone like you," Leona scoffed.

The housewarden laughed before letting out a long sigh.

“Those manners won’t get you far, Kingscholar,"He prompted, “It’s probably because of that tongue of yours that everybody favors King Falena. Well, there’s also your...unique talent.

All of a sudden, Leona felt an oppressive weight crushing down his chest and he could no longer feign indifference at the boy’s words, “But I’m sure not many know about it," He added.

“What do you know?" Leona snapped at him, both hands already curled into fists.

Only a few selected people within the castle knew about Leona’s signature spell, but even those who knew about it were strictly forbidden to talk about it just like he was. That's how much of a disgrace he was to the royal family.

“As much as you can probably guess. Enough to make you reconsider your actions."

This entire situation ended up being just as bad, if not worse, than he’d expected. Leona was in no position to cause a scandal, for if word reached home about him getting into a fight with another student, a housewarden no less, the little freedom he’d gained would be ruthlessly taken away from him again.

After giving his options some thoughtful consideration, he decided to let the housewarden finish his speech.

“Just be quick," He said.

“I’m glad you understand.”

The conversation was over before he knew it. A storm raged inside Leona’s mind as he walked back to his bedroom, his blood pumping too hard to let him think straight or even care about anything else. And only one thing remained certain after everything.

He would not keep wasting any more time.

“...”

Ever since that day, Savanaclaw’s halls were brimming with all sorts of rumors and speculations about what could’ve possibly happened during their meeting, all of them already aware of the sudden change in their attitude towards the other, but neither of them mentioned anything

about his signature spell so far.

At the very least, this reassured Leona that he still had a little more time before the boy deliberately went back on his word.

Amongst the new members of the school's spelldrive team, Leona had been one of the very few selected to join the front lines. On one hand, this meant that he wouldn't be allowed to nap in the grades while the oldest members practiced anymore, but on the other hand, this also meant he now had another chance to challenge Fahari to a test of wits where he couldn't rely on his family's name and power to succeed.

Two smaller teams were formed for practice that day–one led by Savanaclaw's leader and another by Diasomnia's leader, the two being experienced in commanding and all. To nobody's surprise, Fahari didn't even look at Leona's way even once during the selection process, which allowed his fellow dorm leader to claim him instead.

Despite things getting off to a good start, Leona didn't feel at ease in the slightest. Something was conspicuously off. Given the circumstances, the lion had expected to see more enthusiasm, hostility and maybe bloodthirst from his childhood rival, but even as the game was close to ending, the bird beastman still hadn't even tried to approach him.

Until the game took a sudden turn for the worse.

With one last minute to settle the final score, Leona sought to stop the disc from crossing his team's goal post by increasing the speed of his broom. Even though he'd used the artifact many times in the past and never faced any inconvenience, he had a hard time taking control of it this time. The broom was heavy and barely moved despite him using all of his power on it.

And as soon as he looked downwards, he saw the wood starting to crack.

At that moment, people had tried to call out to him, but even so, there was no time to protect himself before the fast approaching iron disc ended up hitting his face and caused him to fall off the broom at a high speed.

The pain was so big that Leona felt his consciousness fade mere seconds after the impact. Pure horror consumed his teammates as they saw the traces of blood he left behind. Fortunately, a greater tragedy was prevented from happening when one of the players closest to him dashed forth to catch his body mid-air.

"Kingscholar! Can you hear me?" A familiar voice called, it was Diasomnia's leader, "Hey you, go get the nurse!"

"Yes, sir!"

People in the background began yelling at each other trying to find the culprit–even though nobody was sure if there actually was one–and trying to assist him. In the meantime, Leona kept trying to open his eyes and move his body only to find out everything remained dark.

But Leona didn't need to rely on his sight to notice the sudden presence of another body standing next to him and whispering into his ear.

"Fahari did this."

Leona's body was still too numb to react in time and stop the person and, before he knew it, he was gone.

"Great Sevens, Kingscholar! You really scared me back there," Leona could easily recognize who was talking this time.

As soon as the mysterious messenger left his side, Fahari had taken his place and tried to put on the act of a concerned housewarden even though nobody saw any reason for it.

“Don't...fuck with me," Leona’s words were a mere whisper, only for the housewarden and himself to hear. Even so, they sufficed to convey all of his rage.

A shocked scream suddenly made everyone turn their eyes at them. Once again, Leona didn't need his eyesight to imagine what kind of face the housewarden was probably making while he saw the skin of his arm turning to sand underneath his touch.

“The housewarden's arm!" Someone screamed.

“I-is that sand?" Another asked.

“What kind of magic is that?!"

Despite his family's efforts, The King's Roar, his signature spell, was no longer a secret well-kept from the world. At that moment, many young mages witnessed the real nature of the lion's power and panic rose among the crowd, but it wasn't until the Diasomnia housewarden came back and used magic of his own to separate the two boys that Leona realized what he'd done.

“...”

Although the doctor had reassured him that the damage to his sight wouldn’t be permanent, it still required a large dose of antibiotics to regain some of it. Because of this, Leona had spent nearly an entire day sleeping in one of the infirmary’s beds and remained utterly oblivious to what was going on at school.

It was a warm afternoon, a light breeze seeped through the open windows and caused the curtains to flutter. Despite keeping his eyes closed, Leona had already been awake for more than five minutes when the sound of quiet footsteps entering the room caught his attention.

Upon opening his eyes, the lion realized his eyes still had some difficulty making out the things in front of him. As soon as he heard his visitor’s voice though, he realized it was the same person who had spoken into his ear the day before.

“Ah! You’ve finally awakened," The vice housewarden of Savanaclaw said with a warm smile on his face.

Ever since his arrival at Night Raven College, Leona had only exchanged a few words with Fahari’s aide. Even though he was the second in charge, the vice housewarden took care of most of the important work. His low profile and amiable demeanor being enough to earn himself his peers’ trust.

“How are you feeling? Want me to call the nurse?" He asked.

“I’m fine," Was all Leona replied.

“I'm glad you're feeling better, then," He paused,“I do regret it had to be under these circumstances, but I've been wanting to approach you for a long time, actually.”

“Is that why you came to see me?" Leona inquired.

“Not really. It’s only been a day but I’ve been taking care of you. It’s my duty as vice-housewarden, after all," He explained.

Leona nodded silently even though he didn’t agree with it. Then, as if sensing the anxiety clouding his mind, the boy spoke again.

“You don’t have to worry about your secret. I explained what happened to the club leader and he threatened Fahari with telling the head mage about it if he kept causing you any more trouble.”

The room went quiet this time. Leona knew he couldn’t simply trust in his words and, even if he did, nothing guaranteed that other students wouldn’t try to get him expelled for fear that he might do the same to them.

“Well, now that you're awake I suppose I shall let the others know so they can come and talk to you," Said the vice housewarden with a much more lively tone.

Before Leona could ask him anything else, the gazelle beastman had already turned around and walked away, leaving him with the doubt of what it was that he actually wanted to talk about.

A little over half an hour passed in utter silence before the sound of countless footsteps approaching cut through the peaceful atmosphere. Just as promised, the vice housewarden had certainly come back–this time in the company of many of their Savanaclaw peers. It had taken some time until they were all finally gathere around him but, as soon as they did, only one of them had the courage to deliver their message.

“Please become our dorm leader!"

Leona’s angry scowl deepened at the mention of those words.

“Please Leo–uh, I mean, Kingscholar. Only someone with your power can take down Fahari from his throne," Another one chimed in.

“I’ve never seen Fahari look as scared as he did when his arm turned to sand!”

“You’re our only hope.”

More and more words of praise and encouragement kept coming after that and, even though Leona had grown tired of them by the second time, his brain was too busy trying to process what was happening to shut them up.

“You really think I'm better than that trash?" Leona huffed with irony, “Ya think just ‘cause I’m royalty I won’t use my magic to hurt you?”

Everyone shared an uncomfortable look.

“I think the answer is pretty obvious,” The vice housewarden spoke up, “It’s because you have been trying to keep it a secret this entire time that we know you don’t take power for granted.”

“Yeah! Besides, who’s better than a prince for the job?" Another student added.

“There’s a reason why I am just a prince, though," The lion pointed.

“Isn’t that because of some old tradition?" The gazelle boy said.

There wasn’t much Leona could add to the argument. In all honesty, he had been thinking of dueling Fahari for a long time, so getting to hear what everyone else thought about it only made his resolve grow stronger.

Although, seeing how Leona was struggling to keep up with the situation, the vice housewarden decided it would be best to allow him more time to think.

“Okay everyone, classes will resume soon and we should leave Kingscholar to rest.”

Little by little, the crowd of students began to dwindle and the infirmary became quiet once more.

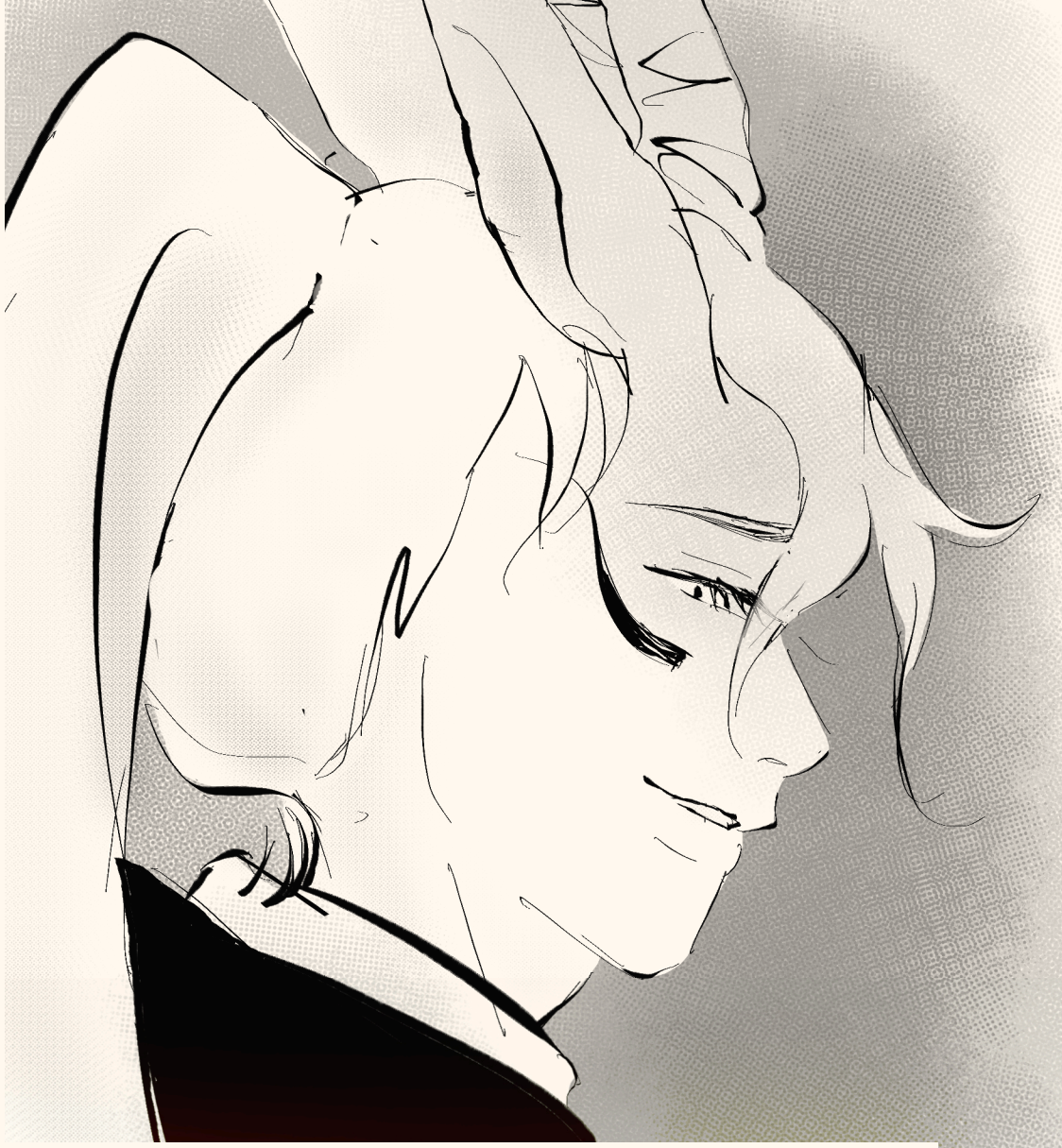
“I still don't understand why you are doing all of this," Leona said, forcing the vice housewarden to stop in his tracks before he had the chance to leave again, “I actually thought you and Fahari were friends, won’t he get mad at you for plotting this?”

Even through his blurry vision, the lion could still notice the way the other boy’s carefully crafted smile faltered for a second before returning to its previous form.

“Is that what we seem like to you? I guess it's understandable since you've only been here for a couple of months," He reckoned, “That person and I couldn't be farther from being friends, though. He and I go a long way back because of our families, but not in the way you’d expect–as a matter of fact, I had managed to become the dorm's leader in my first year here only to go back to living as his shadow when he enrolled the next spring.”

“By the looks of it you seem to have as many reasons to want revenge as I do," Leona replied, “Are you sure letting a stranger take care of him is what you really want?”

All without a warning, the boy’s mild smile turned into a vicious grin, finally revealing his true nature for just Leona to see.



“Even after I graduate, Fahari and I will keep being together for many more years," He let out a humorless laugh, “You don’t have to worry about me getting my revenge, Kingscholar. As long as time allows it, I’ll have plenty of opportunities to rob him of the things he loves. This is only one in a thousand."

“Hah, and here I was thinking this dorm was full of weak herbivores," The lion smiled.

“I'm looking forward to the big showdown, Kingscholar. I can't wait to see what that spell of yours is capable of."

He didn’t need a reply to know he could count on him.

However brief it was, Leona could finally taste what it was like to get back everything the world had stolen from him. But the happier a dream was, the harder it was to wake up.

For even those with the power to build a kingdom in the highest of clouds would eventually lose their throne and fall.

LONG LIVE THE KING

By Keyenuta, Art by Nettles

A sea of dust and upturned sand fills the ravine. The sound of pounding feet, and frantic cries echo like faraway thunder from a storm long since passed. But it wasn't rain that dotted the arid land, nor was it sweat that soaked the soil, it was tears. It was the tears of the crown prince, crying for his papa as a deep, tired roaring voice bellowed in his ears a single word:

“RUN!”

...

7 hours before coronation

The King’s bedroom

Stirring awake in bed, a pair of emerald eyes are brushed awake by the golden rays of the sun. Prodding the dark skinned man to rise from his slumber, urging him to face the day as all he can do is give a low tiresome growl.

“Mmm...” rising up with a yawn, while rubbing the sleep from his eyes, the young beast man blinks away the fog of sleep from his eyes, before a sight seized the breath in his throat. This wasn't his room. It was too bright, the colors of the bed, the scents of the room, and pictures on the wall aren't-weren’t his. They were Farena’s.

“Leona! Brother, you're here!” He still remembers his words, his tired breaths, the scarlet wounds on his body, and the joy in his eyes when he arrived. Surrounded by hyenas and dust before all he could remember was the taste of sand, and thinking, “long live the-”

‘...King?’

“Hm?”

“My king!” A frantic voice called, pulling Leona out of his train of thought, blinking the memories away as he turned to the servant at his door.

“It’s, it's almost time to begin the preparations, my lord.” Cradling his head as a smile crawled across his face, Leona said,

“Right, I'll be right there.”

***

Striding amongst polished sandstone and embedded gold, Leona's emerald eyes list to and fro across the hallways he's known all his life. The lion headed staves of kings and queens past lined the walls with their snarling maws. Seemingly growling and roaring at him with words of traitor! Murderer, kin-slayer! Each screaming at him with unyielding rage until one painting gives him pause. For all its stave says is “Brother.”

Every ruler gains a portrait for their reign. Whether their time was short or long, all were honored by the family. Treacherous or righteous, their memory lives on. Even his. Dressed in bright robes of white, gold and orange, with a mane of fiery hair, Farena's portrait shows a man with a face full of life. Painted with a bombastic laugh, as if nothing in the world could ever take him down. As written beneath the piece were two titles bestowed upon his brother.

Farena, the joyful

Farena, the brave

and to Leona: Farena, the favored.

Leona was always second to his brother, second to be noticed, second to praised, second to the throne, and second to be loved. Even looking at Farena's portrait he saw the blazing sun raised high in the sky. Bathing the kingdom in vibrant gold as if an age of plenty was sure to be made.

“Hmph,” Leona huffed, feeling a smirk crawl across his face the more he gazed at that portrait. At that golden sun wondering when his portrait was made, would they paint him with the moon. Surrounded by a silver light, only known for the setting of the adored sun.

“Hmph, how fitting.” He muttered.

“Hm? My king is something...oh.” The servant says, dipping her head in a bow. “You must miss him quite a lot. I...I can't imagine how you must feel. Growing up with the late long, watching your nephew grow only for that tragedy to occur.” Shaking her head, the servant said, “We may continue when you're-”

“It's fine.” Leona stated, starting to walk away. “Knowing those two, the last thing they'd want is to ruin a special day like this.” He chuckled, “After all, it's not every day there's a coronation. So let's enjoy it despite what's happened. After all, it's what Farena and Cheka would want.”

“I...” nodding with perked up ears, the lioness servant gave Leona a bright smile and said, “You're absolutely right! We'll make this the best coronation we can! Follow me, my king! There's much work left to do!”

“Of course, lead the way.” He said, following close behind until a scent crossed his nose. It was sweet, too sweet, it was almost sickeningly fragrant, but underneath it there was something familiar, something earthy. And next to it he swore he heard the sound of heavy feet.

Marching with all the strictness of a soldier, and the power of a champion.

“Shihihi, morning Leona”

“Good Morning, King Leona.”

‘ah, of course I walked into them. There’s no mistaking that laugh, or that enduring respectfulness.’ Leona thought, as a small grin crawled its way across his face. Leona gaze met the half lidded eyes of Ruggie Bucchi, and be the fierce attentive gaze of Jack Howl. His accomplices, and now, right and left hand men respectively.

“Hmph, you both got cleaned up fast.” Leona teased, looking at the dolled up hyena before him. His eye bags were gone, his face was starting to get fuller, and his clothes could probably buy his whole village if he sold them. But one look in his eyes he saw the same old Ruggie he's always known.

And for Jack, if he didn't know any better, he would've assumed that pup had always been a guard. Piercing eyes, a guarded body, and such pinpoint accuracy in his dress clothes that it would make any general cry tears of joy. Giving Leona a shrug, Ruggie’s smirk only grew wider as he said,

“What can I say, it's not everyday you get to live in the lap of luxury.” Ruggie sang.

“Hmph, it is for you now, have fun getting used to it. And Jack, I better not see any hiccups today either.”

“Heh,” Jack chuckled, crossing his arms. “There's nothing that could get past me.”

“Shihihi, yeah you're right, guess I can say the same for you, King Leona~.” Ruggie teased, “Anyway, I'll be seein’ you later, long live the king.”

“Long live the king," Ruggie and Jack said, giving Leona a playful and respectful bow respectively, before walking off with their own attendants for the big day.

‘long live the king, huh?’

***

4 Hours before Coronation

Royal Bathhouse

If there is a saying Leona never truly felt the weight of before the coup, it was, “If you take aim at the king, then you best not miss.” For if you do, all that awaits you is ruin.

As the sound of splashing water fills his ears, the scent of rose water tickles his nose as the servants and maids wash his hair in cool, crisp water. Hairs standing on end, his body sinking in the water, Leona’s mind begins to drift away. Rocked by the cool stream, as sand and dust pooled with the bath, cooling around his neck.

“My apologies my liege,” the servants huffed, “it will take us some to get your hair ready. There's a lot of sand in it. Please be patient with us.” They chirped, running their hands across his scalp. Caressing his head with little pinpricks of their claws all Leona couldn't help but rest in their touch, leaning into their hands as his eyes glazed in relaxation, wondering if they'd still have the same care if they knew what he'd done.

The king is not just one person, the king is the kingdom itself. Every servant, every soldier, every administrator, all of it serves as the King's eyes, ears, and arms. And for Farena, even if Leona saw himself as the better, the kingdom was with his brother’s in every aspect. His soldiers were loyal, his administrators, content. And the nobles, the nobles adored him. Farena the

beloved, the golden sun that could do no wrong, may as well have been as untouchable as the ball of gas itself.

Loved by the people, loved by his men, and loved by his court, Farena was nigh on invulnerable. Any rebellion formed would be small, sure he could convince the hyenas, maybe even a few poor saps left out to dry in their gilded kingdom. But against an army, a proper army, they would be decimated. Or worse, found out quickly from his brother's oh so loyal citizens right at the start. Simply put, a straightforward approach would always be disastrous. Even if the coup succeeded, even if everything fell into place, there was a small thorn in Leona's side that would make any success useless as soon as it occured.

Cheka. Crown Prince Cheka would always be King if Farena fell. His ultimate insurance, and Leona's ultimate obstacle. But at the same time, he was also Farena's ultimate weakness.

Cheka was always a hard kid to pin down, full of energy and curious to a fault, that little cub always wound up going where he shouldn't. But every time he got in trouble, or took on more than he could chew, daddy dearest was always one step behind. Ready to mail whoever would dare hurt his beloved little cub. And if he was being honest, he was the same way with that little brat.

Though if it came to it, no matter how much he loved his nephew, his dream would always come first. And in a game like this, even a prince was no more than a pawn on the board. All he had to do was get the king exposed. And luckily, he had just the right hyenas for the job.

Pounding feet, gleeful laughter, and frightened cry were the first notes of Farena's Requiem. “UNCA, PAPA!” Cried the prince, “HELP!” he cried again, only to grow fainter and fainter.

Dust was kicked up, as racing feet sounded like thunder, as a mighty roar was heard. Crying and yelling in fury for at what had happened to his boy. Where was he, he should be right here, did something happen?

Over and over thoughts of panic blazed through Farena's mind like a raging inferno. Leaping to any and every possibility to where his son might be. Sending scouts to find him, and guards to hopefully protect him. But as his fear blazed to its zenith, five little words gave that blaze its direction.

"I know where he is!" Leona cried, hurriedly, gasping for breath, drenched in sweat as he told his brother where he thought Cheka was. The dutiful uncle, the clever brother, of course he could find him!

"Thank you brother!" Farena said, his voice cracking with worry, holding onto Leona's shoulders with so much relief. So much utter joy only a parent could give.

"Let's be off, before it's too late!" He stated, going to match off as he heard Leona cry, "You go, I'll be there soon." He huffed, motioning with his head as his brother gave him a nod.

"Right, see you soon, Leona!"

"Yeah, I'll be right behind ya."

***

2 Hours Before Coronation

Royal Garments

The moment Leona got his raiments, it took all he could not to laugh the moment he saw their colors. Browns, reds, and tinges of gold. Beautiful made of course, but compared to his brother's shock of white and vibrant yellows, all he could think was,

'Of course they would.'

Closing his eyes as they wrapped the woven, fur lined threads around his body, Leona remembered the day of Farena's coronation. Him shining like the sun, glistening in white and decked out in polish gold, down right becoming a second sun right before their eyes. Happy and jovial without a care in the world.

But when it was his time to die, all that was his companion was cold silver of the moon. Leona did as he promised, he was right behind his brother every step of the way. Hiding in shadow, slowing his breath, and stalking behind his brother bit by bit, until finally, he appeared.

Fangs bared, and claws ready to tear, Leona dove at his brother, and fought side by side with him as Hyenas and other discontented subjects swarmed around them in a pack.

"Leona!" Farena cried in joy, smiling a brilliant fanged grin as he stood back to back with his beloved brother. "You came just in time!"

"Hmph, like I'd let you rush in alone, still as reckless as ever." He smirked. "Hahaha, that is true. But still, let's end this now! Come brother!"

"Sure thing, my King."

Matching power with calculated strikes, the two lions were unstoppable! Every attack, every attempt was nothing when the two brothers fought together. Nothing and no one would be able to bring them down. No one, besides each other. And in the strike of one night, Farena's reign was no more than the sand in the hourglass for another's.

"Brother...Why?"

"Long, live, The King."

"Long live King Leona!"

Opening his eyes to a sea of cheering and trumpeting, Leona saw every person in the Kingdom, rich, poor, noble, and commoner gaze up at him. At their King. As he was about to be crowned. All these years, every

meticulous plan, and masterful guild led to this. With tears welling in his eyes, and a quiver on his lips, Leona kneeled for the last time as he felt the weight of the crown grace his head. Cold and heavy, but feeling right all the same. Rising up to meet the clear blue sky, Leona roared with all the emotions he had, every buried bit of envy, every bit of fear, every bit of joy, all of it was in this roar and all his citizens roared back with three single words over and over again.

LONG LIVE THE KING!

LONG LIVE THE KING!

LONG LIVE THE KING!

And lastly, as the years went by, Leona's portrait did indeed fill the hall of Kings and Queens. Showing a wise scholarly King amongst the masses, amongst the hyenas and wolves, showed in rays of silver from the shining moon. Titled: Leona, *The Great Uniter.*

And for himself:

Leona The Great Usurper.

Yuu

Jack can you please look at me~

Leona

Your hand's a little shaky there, poor little thing~ don't mess this up.

Yuu

You're lucky you're cute or else you'd be tasting this eyeliner.

JUST ANOTHER DAY AS IDOLS

By Digishima, Art by Nemi

The studio lights shone harshly into the trio's eyes as they were signaled on stage by the newscaster.

"Just behind their debut album release, the bad boys of NRC, please welcome Savanaclaw!"

The three men were guided out to sandwich themselves on the set couch, Jack squished between the two veteran members as they settled down. A perfect show of their personalities as Leona slouched down as far as he could on the cushions with his arms crossed and eyes closed, Jack sitting straight up with his usual stoic face, and Ruggie sitting closest to the host and leaning against the arm to throw her a wink.

The host smiled at them. "Welcome to the show, gentlemen!"

Ruggie put on his most charming smile. "Always a pleasure to see you, Dahlia. How's your husband?"

"Oh, he's doing wonderful, as always. Thank you so much for asking, dear. But we're here to talk about you today," Dahlia giggled, waving him away. "You three just got back from a tour of Wonderland! That has to be exciting, fresh off your debut album drop and your first international tour has been sold out!"

"That's right, we got back from the Queendom last night. There have been so many fans who have come out to show up for us." Jack said, smiling softly. "It's been a huge morale boost to see our music being enjoyed by so many people."

Ruggie elbowed Jack in the side lightly. "And our little pup here is finally starting to grow into his own."

Jack's face flushed, and he rubbed at his hair, messing up his poor stylist's hard work in the progress. "It's true, I'm still wet behind the ears in the industry, but Ruggie-senpai and Leona-senpai have been fantastic teachers."

Leona cracked open one eye to look at his younger mentee. "We wouldn't have brought you on in the first place if we didn't already think that you could cut it. Give yourself more credit."

Jack nodded quickly. "Right."

"You three certainly know how to make an impression, I'll say that!" The host giggled and brought the interview back on track.

It's a blur, really. They've done interviews like this so many times over the past few months that the questions and platitudes and other random nonsense that comes out of the interviewer's mouths have all run together into the same memory.

It's not until Ruggie is grabbing an entire pack of donuts from the craft services table that any of them register that the interview is over and they've got precious few moments to decompress in their dressing room before it's time to head back to their agency's building.

Leona is the first to collapse on the couch in their temporary dressing room, laying across it like a lazy, spoiled cat in the sun. "So annoying."

"Hey, hey, public appearances are important to making a good impression," Ruggie chided, waving a donut at him. "If people who watch like us, then they'll shell out on merch and tickets."

"That's a very...Capitalistic way of looking at things." Jack mussed up his hair further.

"Money makes the world go round, Jacky, and if we aren't making it, then NRC will have us on the streets faster than you can say 'Savanaclaw'." Ruggie chuckled and sat on Leona's legs, unconcerned by the disgruntled noise the other man made.

"Get offa me." Leona groused, making no effort to move.

"Nah, I'm comfy." Ruggie shoved another donut in his mouth and turned his attention back to Jack. "You're getting better at talking to the newsies, y'know? Our boy's growing up so fast!"

"He's not our son."

Jack scoffed, trying to fix his hair in the mirror. "It's just exposure, I guess. It's not as nerve wracking as it was back when I was doing my first interview."

"You were a mess that time." Leona grumbled. "You spilled water all over yourself."

Ruggie set his food aside, wiping his hands off. "Ah, but people loved seeing him so nervous. Remember the Magicam posts that popped up after? 'Jack-kun is so nervous! It's adorable.' 'You've got this Jack! I wanna see him in person!' 'When's the next meet and greet? I wanna pat his head and tell him everything will be okay!' and all that."

"Please don't remind me." Jack slumped in his seat by the vanity.

"But that's the best part!" Ruggie protested.

The car pulls up to the studio and the groups of people waiting outside start to cheer and scream. It's not as big of a crowd as Diasomnia would

get, Leona considers bitterly, but it's bigger than the Ocean Punks have been getting recently so he's satisfied enough with that's enough for him.

The groupies have signs and vintage leather, that's how Savanaclaw knows that they're here for them. No shiny, new pleather vests and jackets like the Diasomnia fans have, their clothes are upcycled and dusty and lack the fake overly shined nature that the fake stuff has.

It's almost a shame that the trio doesn't have the time to stop and talk to many of them. Almost. No matter the devotion fans show, Leona still despises meaningless conversations and fans very rarely have something to say that he hasn't already heard a hundred times already.

Even worse is the reporters trying to get the scoop on a story for some kind of gossip rag article. Nothing of substance, just a way to get a paycheck.

It's an excruciatingly long wait for security to clear a path to the doors between the paps and the fans, with Ruggie and Jack's idle confusion over why they'd been called to Night Raven when they had their schedules packed between recording, promo work, and preparations for the next tour circuit.

They barely had time to sleep with how busy they'd been. And now they'd had to find more time to speak to the label instead of getting a hint of rest.

Leona eventually got sick of the wait. It wasn't like the three of them couldn't hold their own if someone tried anything. Well, maybe Ruggie would have some trouble, but that was his problem, Leona decided. He threw the door open and stood with practiced grace, somehow not losing the tough guy look despite his ability to move so fluidly.

Jack and Ruggie scrambled out after him, moving quickly to keep up so they wouldn't be left behind.

Leona had done it before and he would do it again.

That was all it took for the noise outside to racket up a notch as fans finally got to catch a glance of their idols, surging forward as much as security would allow to try and get a hold of the men.

Leona's reputation got him out of most of it, the look on his face, neutral if not slightly impatient, was working overtime to keep people from trying to touch him,

Jack and Ruggie, however, had far more congenial reputations. Too polite to tell fans that they were in a hurry, too greedy to turn down the change to accept gifts from fans. They both had a fault that kept them from keeping up with their leader.

Jack was stopped a few times, answering polite requests for autographs, letting a few people get photos with him as well. Ruggie was pausing along the path to accept little gifts that fans were trying to pass to the musicians.

Leona stopped at the door, turning to look at the two of them. "Get a move on!" He called, startling them away from their fans.

The two younger members were quick to smile and wave at the fans before they took off after their leader.

The barren, darkly decorated halls of Night Raven Records were broken up with awards and posters belonging to their seven major groups. Four of the seven had all received new members, and now about a fourth of the material on display was slightly outdated.

The favoritism was also on display, as the more profitable groups had more accolades on the walls.

Leona was tailed by his fellow group mates as they were guided towards the office of their definitive boss of bosses, the company head, Dire Crowley.

The tired secretary outside stopped the group at the door, paging their boss to inform him that they had arrived, and Crowley was quick to have them sent inside.

Jack stuck a few steps behind the others, thanking the poor office worker for their hard work, while the older two continued into the office. Whatever was waiting on the other side of the door was not going to be fun.

Dire Crowley, in all his bastardly glory, was sitting back at his desk with his legs propped up on the wood without a care in the world. It wasn't until the door clicked shut completely that he even deigned to look up from his phone.

"Ah, Savanaclaw!" He greeted jovially, dropping his feet and standing. "Have a seat, boys. Have a seat!"

As the group settled into the chairs across from the company head, they tried to relax, still unsure about the reasoning for the impromptu meeting.

Leona, ever the fan of not wasting time, crossed his arms and scowled at Crowley, deciding to get right to the point. "Why're we here?" He asked.

Crowley had the nerve to pout, actually pout, at the man. "Now, Leona, where's your decorum?"

"Sorry, I must have left it all in the recording booth, since that's where we should be right now instead of humoring this meeting." Leona shot back.

The company owner sighed, settling back into the expensive leather office chair. "Fine, fine. Be that way." He folded his hands neatly on the desk. "We've decided that your next album should be cut down to an EP and give the remaining tracks to other groups."

"Bullshit." Leona bit out.

"Now, now. There's no need to look so upset." Crowley tried to soothe.

"Who exactly is 'we'? Because I certainly didn't approve of this." He challenged.

Ruggie leaned forward to shoot a concerned look across the seats to Jack, who frowned and shook his head.

"Well, with the way that the profits are currently distributed, we feel that the tracks would be better suited to a different group." He explained.

"You're giving our songs to Diasomnia, aren't you?" Ruggie's shoulders slumped.

Crowley shook his head. "No. Well, not all of them. You see Pomefiore and Heartslabyul have been gaining traction so we've decided that the other three would benefit from having some extra tracks on their next releases. You understand, don't you?"

Leona growled, baring his teeth at the man. "Like hell I do, we've had record sales!"

"Record sales for Savanaclaw–"

"We're on the hits list."

"Three spots below Diasomnia."

"We're already over halfway through the recording sessions!"

"And that is unfortunate. However, the board and I still feel–"

"Fuck the board, Crowley!" Now Leona was on his feet, slamming his palms into the solid wood of the man's desk.

The owner sighed, pinching at the bridge of his nose. "Mr. Kingscholar, we have to prioritize the more profitable groups."

“What’s next? Cutting our shows?”

Crowley was quiet at that.

“No. No fucking way are you screwing us over like this.”

“We’re only doing what is best for all of our members in the long run,” Crowley tried to placate the enraged man.

Leona closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “Ruggie, Jack, step out for a minute. I gotta talk to the boss alone.”

Hearing the dangerous edge in the frontman’s voice, Crowley started to stammer, “Now hold on, I don’t think they need to–”

“Yeahhh, sorry Crowley.” Ruggie stood, stretching his arms up into the air and offering him a lazy smile. “You answer to the board, I answer to him.”

Jack nodded, going and holding the door open for Ruggie as they left the room.

Remarkably, the office was soundproofed rather well, meaning that the muffled yelling from the other side of the door was incomprehensible even to the men leaning against the wall just outside the door. As loud as Leona could get, it was almost impressive that the only thing they could hear was how angry the unknown words were.

“So...” Ruggie held out a beaded bracelet he got from one of the fans for Jack to take. “This probably won’t end well.”

“Definitely won’t.” Jack agreed, inspecting the wolf shaped focus bead before he slipped it onto his wrist. “We’ll be lucky if we don’t get cut completely when this is over.”

The shorter man gave Jack a smile. “Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that. You’ve seen Leona-san fight before, but this is him angry.”

“There’s a difference?” Jack asked, skeptical.

“Huge difference. He gets angry when he’s passionate.” Ruggie explained.

The yelling inside the office stopped, and a few seconds later, Leona threw the door open, letting it slam into the wall.

“Let’s go.” He ordered, equal parts smug and pissed. He didn’t stop to wait for the other two to follow.

Ruggie jogged to catch up to him, walking at his side. “Well...?”

“Every song they’re taking, we’re getting a new one to replace it. We also get to release our versions of ones we’ve finished recording vocals for. We’re releasing one EP now, and another once we’ve got our replacements.”

“More frequent releases would benefit us...” Ruggie reasoned.

Jack spoke up from behind them. “And the tour dates?”

“Got it back up, but didn’t get them all back.” Leona answered.

Ruggie pursed his lips. “Sounds like you let them off easy.”

He shook his head. “I did what I could without getting us dropped from the label.”

“What’s the plan now, then?” Jack wondered, finally moving to stand on Leona’s other side.

The anger eased out of Leona’s body language, replaced entirely by the smugness. “We do what we’ve been doing. Prove them wrong.”

Jack and Ruggie shared another look, grins spreading across their faces.

“Right!”

Nemisisnemi

@NemisisNemi

SLEEPING LIONS

By Waffle, Art by Lemonrini

Everything had gone perfectly, which was shocking given the motley crew Crowley threw together. Yuu sighed, and was heading back to the dorm when she saw something bright. Was there a fairy left over or one that had escaped the party? She blinked.

There, leaning against a wall, was Leona. Leona was always pleasing to the eyes but under the swaying leaves, somehow the scene felt like a painting she had wahoo'd her way in. Vil would probably be mad if he saw this though, given that the carefully chosen and expensive clothing was in the dirty grass. Speaking of mad, there was a more pressing threat. Leona would be pissed if she woke him up.

Especially since he had to do a lot of work. Well, a lot for Leona's standards anyway. She started tiptoeing her way out, when–as if also lured into the lion's den by the serene beauty–a butterfly fluttered in. It wavered in the sky until settling on Leona's shoulder. Its wings flapped for a few seconds before setting down as if it too was in the mood for a nap. Yuu raised up the camera slowly and, with the quietest snap she could manage, took a photo.

Now it was really time to retreat.

"Hey Herbivore, where are you running to after flashing light in my eyes and ruining my nap?" Leona said through a few yawns.

Huh?

"I didn't even have the flash on." She had turned it off. She checked three times that morning.

"So, you did take a picture." He smirked. However she was distracted by the butterfly that was still on his shoulder. She took another picture.

"What?" He squinted at her.

She turned the camera over. Both pictures looked good.

"Why did you take that, weirdo?"

"I wanted another picture for the contrast. It's a set now:. The sleeping and waking king., Maybe I'll ask Ruggie for a good place to sell these."

He didn't answer and just sent his judgment through his eyes. She ignored that. The best ways to handle the lion's dens was to run but, well, running was no longer an option. So she went for plan B: Pretend you don't care.

"Is this really such a good place to nap?" The wall wasn't comfy. That should have been obvious. It was made of brick. It probably scratched up Leona's fancy threads. Vil was really going to be mad. The ground was soft though. The grass squished just right and wrapped around her just a little for something to be there but not enough to poke her awake. A nap actually sounded really nice. All that running around had taken more out of her then she thought.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Leona asked.

"Napping. I judged your wall pillow. You have bad taste in pillows. That wall sucks. But the grass is nice and I'm tired." There had been so much prep and stress for this fairy gala.

“I have great taste in pillows and this is MY nap spot.”

“You don’t own this school.” She yawned and curled up. Just before she fully got lost in her dreams, she felt something heavy land on her stomach. Was Grim needing a nap too? She thought before falling into a blissful dream.

Yuu was woken up by a bright thing.

Did Grimm play with flashlights again?

She blinked. That wasn’t Grim.

“The sun is evil in every world.” Yuu muttered. How did the sun,setting or rising, always find just the right angle to wake her up? Was it late or early? Who knows, either way she should really go to the dorm. Sleeping outside was probably bad. Except oddly, she was having trouble moving. There was something on her stomach. It was heavy.

“Stop wiggling my pillow. You're interrupting my nap.” A voice echoed from the lump on her stomach. That was not Grim. Oh right, to avoid Leona she was going to pretend to nap. Well, that plan failed. Time to retreat.

“Your pillow has to return to her dorm.” She said and tried to move but sleepy limbs made that difficult.

“I’m sleeping.”

“Well, talented sleep talking man, you can go back to your wall.” God, This man was heavy. Why were sports people heavier than mountains?

“No, the wall is worse.”

“Dear, sleep connoisseur. Your time with the Yuu pillow has ended. Please tell us about your experience? What is the Yuu pillow rating?” He paused for a moment and repositioned himself on her stomach.

“I’d give you a 70.”

“I deserve at least an 80.” Yuu never lifted anything but Grim. She was the softest human on campus.

“Too noisy. 65.”

“You can’t demote me.”

Instead of replying, Leona’s ears twitched and suddenly he shot up. In a blink he was gone. Yuu was baffled until she saw Ruggie running down the walk. Ah, well, work is one way to scare a lion. Yuu waved at Ruggie but quickly retreated before he could say anything.

As soon as she entered the Ramshackle dorm, the floors creaked loudly as Grim ran towards her.

“Minion! Where were you?” He looked a little annoyed.

“Oh, Grim you’re up? Sorry I'm late. I was.....I had a cat nap.”

“On the ground?”

“I was soooo tired.” Yuu yawned and waved at the cat.

“Better get back to bed, bye.” She flopped on her bed. It took a while to go to sleep but she eventually had warm dreams of wild fairies and flower fields.

Magic school was not that different from normal school. It was interesting how school could drain the awe out of any field. The only problem was that some of the subjects were way worse.

For example, Alchemy.

Alchemy was so complicated. It was chemistry on steroids and it made Yuu's head spin. Why exactly did mandrakes plus warm water equal a luck potion and mandrakes plus cold water make a poison? It didn't make any sense and she feared the answer was just going to be magic. Something fell on her lap but Yuu really needed to finish an assignment.

"Herbivores really love running in circles,." A voice full of amusement said. Yuu looked down. There was a sleeping Leona resting in her lap, well he appeared to be anyway, his eyes were closed at least.

"Alchemy is hard," She protested.

"It's not. You just need to focus on one prey instead of hunting all of them." What did that mean? Yuu blinked and did one equation then another.....That was easier....

"Are you planning on napping there?" Yuu asked.

"You're the best rated pillow around," he said. Yuu was confident in that.

"I told you that I at least deserve an 80."

He didn't reply and curled up around her legs. Yuu ran her fingers through his hair and finished up her alchemy homework. The sun meandered through the sky and a rare day of peace passed in Night Raven College.

THE SETTING SON

By QuillAffinity, Art by Lemonrini

He may look like him, but Leona was his mother's son.

Sure, they had the same piercing green eyes, though his own had dulled with age. The same rich, curled hair that was the envy of many a lion beastman, even if his was graying and thinning more and more everyday. The same long hands, yet his weighed heavily with loose skin, threaded with ancient veins. The old man's eyes quirked up in a bitter, ghostly smile. He'd been as handsome as his son once. Long ago, when the sun hung above his head and its lights illuminated his and his kingdom's gilded future before him. Now?

Now, he was a sick widower.

Dying slowly.

The rightful King of Afterglow Savannah, Nia of the fifth house of Kingscholar and son of Grand King Jelani the Warring, grimaced as he pushed himself to sit up on his frigid, lonely bed. One would think that after so long, he'd have gotten used to the cold solitude of an empty bed. But you'd be wrong. His throat ached and his voice was but a weak rasp as he called out.

"Kifaji...Kifaji!" Immediately, the bird beastman rushed into the opulent, tomb-like room that was the King's quarters. Ever at His Majesty's beck and call. The ever-frazzled man dipped down on one knee in greeting, but Nia's mind was elsewhere. In bright, sunlit memory. Of his Falena, getting married to the only woman he promised to love, the only woman he had ever loved. Of his wife, cunning and quick but always, always loyal to her heart. Loyal to her sons. To her youngest, her baby, her sweet, Sunset Boy who she loved with all her soul.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Where..." Breathing was getting more difficult. It was hard to get enough air. Was it the sickness? The grief? The guilt?

"Where...is my son?"

"C-Crown Prince Farena is currently in a parliament meet-"

Nia roared.

It was weak, raspy. A phantom of his own self, his own power. But a toothless lion is still a lion. And Nia was still King. His pride, selfish as it was, was never a fragile thing. Kifaji immediately silenced, still kneeling on the plush fur rugs below them.

"No! Leona! Where is Leona?" Kifaji dipped his head, angling it parallel to the floor. How long had it been since the King had called Leona his son? How long had it been since Leona considered himself his father's son? Despite his whirlwind of thoughts, Kifaji answered smoothly, years of advising His Majesty speaking through his aging body for him.

"The Second Sun of the Kingdom has replied to the Crown Prince's summons. He will arrive tomorrow afternoon after his classes for the day have concluded." The bird beastman risked a glance towards the King after delivering his report. His heart beating rapidly with concealed stress.

But what he found was not as he expected. Kifaji thought he'd see his King, indignant from being pushed aside, from being made a second priority. Yet that was not the case. Instead, the bird beastman saw, for a

rare moment, a man. Not a King. A father who suddenly looked very old and weary. His expression such that his eyes were clouded in his heart's pain. His Majesty, Nia the Victorious, indeed looked like a man broken. Rightly so, the bird beastman mused somewhat pityingly, after so tumultuous a life, why shouldn't His Majesty feel aggrieved?

The rightful King, himself, dismissed Kifaji with a wave of a heavy hand. Much to the advisor's equal relief and worry. What, the old man thought, what on earth would he say to his youngest child?

I'm sorry? I was wrong, forgive me? Unhand your anger, your sadness for I do not have long left in this world? Prune your brambles away from me, for i am your father? Your only father...His only father...The dearly departed Queen's words echoed in Nia's memory. Sharp as the day she challenged him with them, sharp as her fangs. Clear as the tears on her face, clear as her hatred towards him at the end.

"You are his only father! Farena is not your only child! Leona is here, he is trying, and he loves you more than all the light in the world, Nia. If you betray that sweet heart of my son, I will never forgive you. Never! In Life and Death, in light and dark!"

Nia closed his eyes, finding them wet and weak. He missed his wife. He missed his Leona. And hated himself for missing that child so late.

Too late, perhaps.

—

Leona sighed. Realistically, he knew he couldn't avoid going home forever. Nor could he have hoped to keep his overblot a secret from his family, not with the way that damn Headmage ran things. So here he was.

Home.

The lion beastman's lips curled into something between a smirk and a snarl as he sat in the chauffeured car Kifaji sent him. Not trusting the younger prince to arrive on time. Home, Leona was home. But as much as he loved his country, as much as he dreamed of its success and glory finally being recognized worldwide - it hadn't felt like home in a long time.

At least his airheaded older brother wasn't the type of person to use their father to manipulate him to come home. Which, naturally, meant that Farena was being serious for once.

His father wanted him home.

Leona would've laughed at the thought had he not have been sure the driver would snitch on him to Kifaji. But his father was the reason that opulent palace hadn't felt like home, why he had to tiptoe around servants and councilors alike. That man...That man had never raised so much as word in his defense in all of Leona's life. Always looking through him and never at him. And now he's calling the bad seed home.

To do what exactly? Berate him for overblotting? For bringing shame and ridicule to the Kingscholar crown? The second prince supposed either or both were equally possible. That man had never minced words when it came to him, his youngest child, rather, all his tempered guidance and affection had been reserved for that prodigal son currently warming his throne.

Had Leona been raised under that warm, caring light of his father's, would he have turned out different? Would the pityingly mocking looks from servants and the backhanded comments from nobles have scarred his psyche less? Leona sighed. What was the use of dwelling on what ifs? What ifs nearly got him and his dormmates killed, after all. No, Leona thought, whatever that old man had to say - it wouldn't change anything.

Not a damn thing.

—

Nia had been fifth in line for the throne.

Their father had several wives, each from a different pride across Sunset Savannah. Some, Nia remembered, were quite kind to their royal children, other's, like his and his brother's, hadn't been as gentle. From the moment he was presented under their country's brilliant light as his father's fifth son, Nia's life had been doomed to violence.

Their warlord of a father died early, a feast for maggots along the border of some acre of territory he wanted for himself. Jelani the Warring indeed, Nia thought with a laughing sort of snarl, Grand King he was not. Because of that fool, the crown had erupted into chaos. Everyone from the Queen to the youngest consort started a decades-long bloodbath for the throne.

The Queen had been Jelani's first and main wife. Nia's early memories of that woman were cloudy, but the vision of her cold eyes and bloodstained hands during that time period would never leave him. Supposedly, their father had favored his second son at the time, intending to make him the Crown Prince upon winning his newest bout of conquests. The only problem?

He wasn't the Queen's son.

So she had him killed. With a flick of her bangled wrist and a cruel curl to her full lips, Nia's second oldest brother was dead. Said brother had been good to him and his brother, Nia remembered, always taking time out his day to play with his clumsy little siblings. Second Prince's mother, in her grief, was reported to have ended her own life. But the current King of Sunset Savannah had his doubts about that incident even now.

The Queen then proceeded to install her son, First Prince, as King, much to the horror of Nia and his brother. Who knew the son of a bitch to be a vainglorious, greedy bastard who only knew how to attack those weaker than him. So, in perhaps her only show of motherly kindness towards her children, Nia's mother snuck him and his brother out of Sunset Savannah. Under the dark of night with the scent of vengeance in the air, the second consort of Jelani the Warring sent her only children away. Nia

was only fourteen.

His sickly brother, fifteen.

Somehow, she had arranged for them to hide away on a then-unclaimed island on the western coast of their country. Nia and his brother were terrified. They, pampered princes from the heart of the capital, knew little to nothing of the sort of people now instructed with their safeguarding. But who would've thought that on that isolated little speck of an island, Nia would find her. Like a jewel of brilliant dawn, a crown of freedom and joy.

Tumaini

Her name was Tumaini

The only child of the island chief and the youngest lioness beastwoman amongst that close-knit population. At first, she was this annoying and ever curious thorn in Nia's side. Her sharp eyes, the warm shade of dark amber, glinted at him with all sorts of mischievous plots to drag him into. Plots that, more often than not, led to trouble amongst her pride. And yet...Tumaini's family never berated or demeaned her like the royal family was so eager to do to their progeny. They loved her. Cared for her. And, as she grew and blossomed into a brilliant and brave leader for them, respected her.

Nia, his brother, and Tumaini. They were a little unit in of themselves. Nia playing the exasperated but practical little brother. Tumaini, the challenging and adventurous troublemaker. His older brother as the laughing mediator between the two. It was a good life, Nia remembered, the sunlight had been their crowns and their bounty their affection for one another. The world was just that single island, cut off from the slaughter for the throne. Nearly a whole new world altogether.

But all dreams end.

Their mother had fought hard, but compared to the Queen's political backing, she didn't stand a chance. News of their mother's death came in Nia's eighteenth year and his brother's nineteenth, and, just like that, they were on a boat back to the capital. Complicated feelings for their mother aside, neither brother could stand to leave her sacrifice for naught. It was as simple and complex as that. And thus, the rebellion began.

Tumaini at his side.

Nia's memories of that time were full of her. Her strategies. Her brilliance. Her love. He couldn't have orchestrated his oldest brother's murder without her. Nor could he have handled his brother's worsening illness without her. It was a sickness in the blood, he'd been told. A sickness that weighed the body down, made it ache and burn in pain until death was the most merciful route the soul could take.

It was that sickness that took his Leona from him

He and Tumaini could only mourn for a short time before their rebellion hit its peak. A Queen torn away from a throne she fought so hard to keep would've been difficult to witness - had she been a Queen worthy of the crown she wore. But she wasn't. Her execution had been just as easy. Which, of course, left the matter of her second son. Third in line from the throne, the youngest and smallest of his queen-mother's two princes. Nia didn't have many memories of his third oldest brother.

But he had been kind.

So was it any surprise when that kind older brother overblotted? When blot burst, foaming and scorching hot, from his lips as his mother and brother lay dead at his feet. Nia had never seen someone overblot before. Nor had Tumaini. And they cowered at the animal gutteralness of it. The awful rage and grief and pure struggle on horrific display before them. The stealing of Third Prince's body by his own grief. Even old as he was, Nia could remember it with lightning clarity.

Tumani wanted to leap in, to reign in her fear and help the third prince, but their advisors, fellow rebellion leaders, held her back. Kicking and screaming they held Tumaini back from stopping his brother's death. They didn't bother reigning Nia back.

They didn't need to.

Nia watched his third brother rampage like a dying animal and die like a dog in the halls where they once lived all together. Screaming for the return of his family. And he didn't do a damn thing about it. His thoughts were filled of rebellion achieved. A golden crown atop his head. A silver one on Tumaini's brow. A new, more peaceful era of Sunset Savannah. Vengeance achieved in the name of his Leona, his mother.

And, like a bad joke, that's how it played out. The politicians and councilors were only all to eager to install Nia and Tumaini as the nation's new King and Queen of Sunset Savannah. At the green age of twenty, Nia became King and Tumaini, his beloved wife. Naturally, after witnessing the horrors their rebellion brought, the two needed time before starting a family. But their love was a true thing, a ray of sunlight in the dark or the gossamer touch of moonlight on a sleeping brow.

Three years into a steadying reign, Farena was born. His first child, his first son. A large cub by beastman standards but hale and healthy. He looked like his mother, softened. The same amber eyes made kinder. The lush, textured red-yellow curls more tamed. The smiling, mischievous mouth softened into something more genuine. Nia quickly set to work.

Tumaini had made him swear, in his vows to her and her pride, that she'd be his only wife. And, after being subject to the chaos of a consort-ridden battle of succession, Nia was all too eager to comply. Farena grew splendidly between him and Tumaini. A rising star to light the future of their brilliant country. And Tumaini, his beautiful hope, was the best mother Nia could've ever asked for. A woman of few words, but a wealth of affection in her actions, in her defense and support of her child.

She sang him songs to sleep. Played with and chased him around the palace grounds. Told him stories of her youth spent by Nia's side. Though...There were times, more often then not, that Nia would catch his wife's eyes linger on the horizon, where her family, her island was.

And it frightened Nia.

Tumaini, leave? No. No, her place was here in his palace, in his family. If she missed her home he'd plant gardens full of her native flowers. If she yearned for the birdsong of her island, he'd give her cages full of the loveliest songbirds. If she longed for the simple shell bracelets they wove one another in their youth, he'd commission the finest artisan to present her with shellwork that'd make any mermaid weep with envy. But what did his beloved wife say in the face of his earnest efforts?

"This is cruel Nia. You cannot place me in a box and expect me to fill it, stop these awful things. They are beneath you."

Perhaps that was the first crack in their family's foundation. The first drop of bitterness in Nia's heart towards his Queen. She was always stronger than him, his Tumaini. Always far more willing to call out the false pleasantries and genteel fakeness that surrounded her in both court and the political sphere. Which, in turn, earned her no shortage of both political and social rebuke.

Truthfully, Nia agreed with Tumaini's beliefs in offering forthright aide and opportunities to hyena beastmen and other struggling communities, but did she have to go about it so bluntly? She rejected the long-held traditions of their country and advocated, loudly and without fear, for the development of their nation into a more modern, more competitive one. Then there was the matter of her family...As per their marriage agreement, Tumaini's island became an officially recognized part of of the kingdom. But with how small both the population and the territory was, his wife's position in court was practically foundationless.

But did that stop her?

No. Not one bit.

Nia's advisors cautioned him that Tumaini's ways would turn nobility against them and, by extension, Farena. Their plan of action? Have another child. If it was girl, they could arrange a beneficial engagement that could strengthen Tumaini's position in court. If it was a boy? Nia didn't like thinking about the possibility.

But a spare for Farena couldn't hurt.

By that point, their relationship was a bit strained. Coupled with the struggles and predicaments Tumaini constantly faced within her campaigns, it had been difficult to broach the topic of having another child. She was hurt. Nia had hurt her. And it was one of the old widow's deepest regrets that he manipulated her need for his care and support to convince Tumaini that they were going to 'try' again. After a few tries, she fell pregnant. But unlike her first pregnancy, this one had been difficult.

Tumaini was often dizzy or sick and had to commit to bedrest much earlier than when she had Farena. Which had the added benefit of cooling off a good portion of the nobles and parliament members who opposed her rally for change. Sure, her campaigns suffered in her absence, but Nia was excited by the prospect of being a father again. Farena, at ten years old, was certainly overjoyed to be a big brother. And, after a hard day of labor during an especially dry July, Nia's second child was born.

A second son.

Farena was smitten from first sight. Handling the weak little child as if a stray wind would steal him away. Unwilling to let him go even when that small cub nipped at his fingers and face. Indeed, that child was smaller than average with a weak roar, but that wasn't his most striking feature. He looked like him. Everything, from his eyes to the shade of his fingernails was taken from his father. And Tumaini? Tumaini was overjoyed.

Gone were her pregnancy struggles. Gone were her frustrations over traditionalist nobility. Gone was her strife with her husband. What were such things in the face of so sweet a child, so beloved a baby? Tumaini smiled brilliantly in a way Nia hadn't seen in a long, long time as she held her youngest over her heart. Pressing endless kisses unto his small palms.

Leona, she named him.

And, oh, the love she gave to that little cub. Under her diligent care, Leona went from a little runt to a plump, bouncing little toddler who shared in his mother's mischievous ways. Constantly escaping Kifaji's careful watch in favor of seeking out either Nia himself or his wife. Mostly his wife. She never shooed him away. Quite the opposite, Tumaini always placed Leona first, always letting him chatter her ear off with his seemingly endless questions. It was no secret that the Queen of Sunset Savannah had made certain sacrifices in giving Farena to the

crown to train and teach to become its future king, but Leona?

Leona was her's.

His first word had been her. His first steps had been towards her. Her Sunset Boy, the Queen had called him. Like the cooling winds of twilight and the rich purple hues of a sunset sky, Tumaini always said Leona would usher in a new age for Sunset Savannah. That he and Farena would bring about new, glorious days for their country.

Nia was ashamed to admit that, during that time, he actually grew quite jealous of his wife's attention straying towards their youngest child. Instead of sharing their marital bed, Tumaini made it a habit to sleep in the children's quarters whenever Leona had nightmares. Staying at his side, constant as starlight. She taught him their country's language as well as her native one that Nia never quite grasped. She introduced him to all her favorite plants and flowers, their uses and meanings and the stories of her love for them. Most of all, she gave him all the seashells she had left from her home.

They had been a wedding gift from Nia, a symbol of his commitment to both her and her people. He had selected every one of them himself. So when he saw Leona playing with them, showing them to his beloved older brother in the form of half-baked necklaces and bracelets - Nia got upset.

What had he said to that small child? It must've been something awful, for the expression of fear and pain on his second son's face stuck with him still. And Tumaini, who was coming to ask her family to join her for a rare familial meal, had all but torn Nia's ear off with her teeth. The mere sight of her baby's tears sending her into a maternal rage.

They did not have lunch that day.

Rather, Tumaini, ever honest and true, confronted him about his unfair and neglectful treatment of his son. Swearing not only that Leona sincerely loved him, but that he needed to be just as much a part of his life as Farena's. And what had Nia done back then? He had scoffed. Leona wasn't a fool. He knew his place. He'd learn to accept his position as leader of the Sunset Warriors. What did his youngest child need his father for in that regard? Nia's time and care would be better spent raising Farena as a King worthy of Sunset Savannah.

If only the present-day King could have strangled himself back then! He had taken his Leona for granted. That child, named after his older brother, after that dearest companion of their youth. Taken from them too soon, how would Nia's brother have treated his littlest nephew had he lived? Surely better than he, Leona's own father, had.

Surely.

—

Leona knew his father had been sick. He'd been sick for a long time. Needing to pass the responsibilities of ruling Sunset Savannah to Farena after seeing him married. He knew that. He was there. Attending those small, quiet ceremonies where the air stunk with worry and oncoming grief for his father and the country. The King was ill. But knowing that and seeing that were two different things.

Leona stood, unbowed, in his parents' old bedchamber, looking at the man he had to call father for the rest of his life. He, at first, tried to find scraps of his mother in the room, bright green eyes scanning the once-familiar walls. But the second son could find none. None of her paintings, her embroidery, or even her favorite books. No trace of that kind, guiding light of his youth. Of the one person who fought tooth and nail for him, when all the world overlooked him. No warmth existed in this well adorned room. Just the King.

King Nia of the Sunset Savannah was a thin shadow. Propped up on an opulent bed, the stark lines of his father's collarbones were drawn in sharp contrast. Most of his once-dark hair was graying and white, and

though they were dreaded and arranged neatly around King Nia's face, the thinning of his mane was evident. The skin on his face was lined and heavy, only outdone by his hands. Leona swallowed. Heart twisting just looking at his father.

"Leona...you've come back."

"Farena said you needed to talk to me." Leona was almost proud of how detached he sounded, how unfeeling even as his eyes trailed across the tubes of his father's IV lines and heart monitor. Almost.

Nia looked at his son. He'd grown taller since the last time he laid eyes on him. But he also looked tired. On guard from him, his own father, but tired in a way no child should be. Tumaini had looked like that, in the end.

She'd grown exhausted covering his neglect of Leona in favor of Farena. She'd grown achingly tired of trying to convince those who benefited from inequality to consider those they viewed as their lessers. And, most of all, Tumaini's heart had been irrevocably broken when Nia had announced his thoughts on taking another, more politically-backed wife. Oh the look in her eyes then, the look in Leona's eyes now. The King swallowed his tears.

"I-Yes, yes I do...I heard from your brother that you...at that school you-"

"I overblotted." Nia flinched. Cutting to the bone - like mother, like son. Leona sighed and ran a slightly trembling hand through his hair.

"I wanted something to go my way and, like every time that happens, it didn't. I got frustrated and overblotted. Terrorized my underclassmen for a while but they're fine. I'm fine."

Leona clenched his hands, remembering to school his expression into neutrality. Talking about his overblot was the very last thing he wanted to do with his father. Knowing him as Leona did, the King was probably just going to scold him for causing a scene and bringing the scent of scandal to the royal family. Nothing he nor his mother hadn't heard before, Leona thought with an internal snarl of bitterness.

Before his overblot, Leona tried not to think of his mother. Thinking of her, of her belief in him hurt too much to ever disturb the mountain of pain her memory was buried under. But now? His thoughts were filled with all the memories he had left of her. The way she'd let him tie up her goddess braids in all sorts of insane configurations and wear them out fearlessly in the face of paparazzi starving to find any and all her flaws. The way she taught him to make jewelry in a slow, careful way to channel his frustrations, lending him her favorite shells from her hometown to make those clumsy things halfway decent.

When he'd have nightmares of King's Roar withering everything and everyone he loved, she'd be right there. Rushing to his bedside with a cool hand on his sweaty forehead and her soft scent filling the air. Sunset Boy, she called him in her mother tongue that sounded like flowers blooming. Leona would give anything to hear her call him that again. Just once more. Arriving back to palace...the halls that once seemed so frigid without his mother now bustled with new life thanks to Cheka and his sister-in-law. Truthfully, Leona appreciated it in a numb sort of way.

But that didn't make the hole in his heart any smaller. Missing her never stopped, and Leona doubted it ever would. Neither would missing the way life had been when she was alive. No one had dared call him 'useless' or a 'bad-omen' while Queen Tumaini breathed. She never made him feel less than. Standing in front of the King? His father?

That's all Leona could feel.

"Leona, I...I didn't call you here so we could talk about that which is painful to you. I called you here because...because I owe you an apology." The second son of Sunset Savannah stopped breathing. Nia looked away from his child, swallowing with difficulty.

“I’m sorry Leona.”

Sorry? He’s sorry? For what exactly? What small thing had the King done to him that could be solved with so flimsy a word? An “I’m sorry” doesn’t erase every instance where Leona had waited outside his father’s study just to catch a glimpse of the man, just to hear him speak, much less to say a kind word towards him. It doesn’t get rid of the ridicule or the gossip he, as a child, had to endure because everyone knew his brother was too busy being perfect and his father was too busy hating him to raise their voices in defense of him. An “I’m sorry” didn’t fix the fact his mother was dead.

And that Nia was responsible.

His mother wept. And wept often. Usually when she thought people couldn’t see her. Tumaini had a reputation, after all. But Leona could never stand to leave his mother alone, especially when so many of the nobles were just as cruel to her as they were to him. But no noble, no senator, or wrinkly skin bag of a parliament member caused Queen Tumaini to shed more tears than his father. That was something Leona would never forget.

Or forgive.

“Is that all? Can I go back to school now?” Leona’s voice was tight, the only thing keeping the venom from his fangs was the sound of his father’s shaky breaths and the uptick in his heart monitor. Nia looked at his son, withered eyes watering in hurt.

“I know...I know one apology can’t ease your pain, but-”

“You’re right. Your apology, singular, and your potential apologies, plural, are never going to ease my pain. Which means the only reason you’ve dragged me here is to ease your pain.”

Nia looked at the man before him. He’d once been a little cub who’d coo happily just seeing his father. He used to be a little child who’d follow at his heels, eager for his attention. He used to love Nia. Used to think the world of his bloodstained father. Now the man before him could scarcely keep the anger out his voice, much less his eyes.

Not that the King blamed him.

If he had been a better man, he would’ve honored his wife. Would’ve paid an equal amount of attention to his children. Would’ve never neglected Tumaini and Leona to the point where she threw herself even deeper into her campaigns. All for the sole purpose to carve out better country for their children. Nia should’ve helped her then, should’ve supported her. Maybe...Maybe then she wouldn’t have gotten in that damn car and-

“Leona, please, I-”

“Do you feel better now, Your Majesty? Is your guilt absolved? Can I go home now?” This time the venom splatted from Leona’s mouth recklessly. This wasn’t home, and the man before him hadn’t been his Baba in a long time.

The King placed a thin, wrinkled hand against his face, drawing it down slowly as his tears finally sprung-free. Leona’s venom stalled in his throat at the sight, choking him. He...The last time Leona saw his father weep was when they laid his mother in the ground, shrouded in white and silver. All of the sudden, all the nobles and lawmakers had no problem with Leona’s mother. Now she was a ‘revolutionary’ and other hypocritical bullshit. But that wasn’t what caught Leona’s attention.

It was his father. Carrying his mother’s body to the royal graveyard, thousands of miles away from her family, her homeland. Nia had cried then, bitter guilty tears that Leona never forgot. And now, before his youngest child, those same tears lined Nia’s face.

Had his father always been so thin? Had his breathing always been

so heavy? And his gaze, Leona had his eyes, but why were his so unfocused? Sick, Leona thought, My father is sick.

“It’s my fault! You’re right, you are...I just...I should’ve protected you, my sweet boy. Should’ve loved you like I loved Farena! I just...I just...” Nia sobbed into his hands, his hoarse voice crackling as he raised it. It all went wrong with him, he knew. His good, kind child who once depended on him now couldn’t bear to look at his father. And it was his own damn fault! Why didn’t he listen to his wife?

Leona had nearly died!

His boy, named after his beloved brother, would’ve vanished. Just like that. Nia would’ve lost him forever without his son ever knowing how much he loved him. How much he regretted towards him. Tumaini, Nia thought, Tumaini I nearly killed our boy...and for what? Because looking at that dear face was like looking into a mirror? And Nia hated no one moreso than himself? Because his son, his blood yearned for a position and power Nia never thought to break tradition and give until it was too late? The withered old lion could only weep, sorriest not for himself, but for his child he so bitterly neglected.

A hand rested on his bony shoulder.

Nia looked up. Standing above him was his son, his own veil of tears in his eyes as he looked down at his father. Leona’s expression somewhere between pained and vexed. When his son spoke, his voice was low, not soft but not cruel either.

“Okay...Okay, that’s enough.”

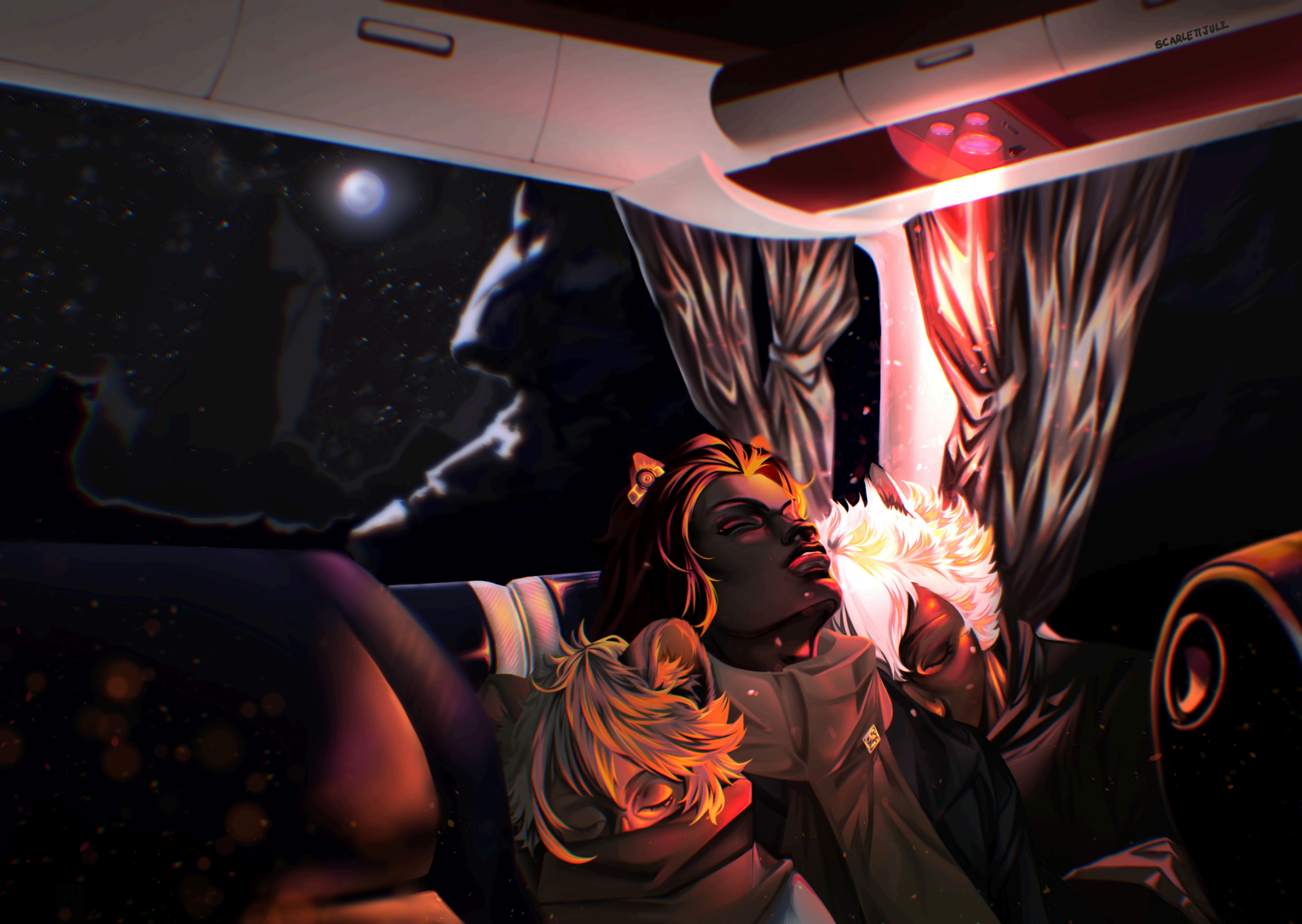
“Leona-!”

“You’ve said what you need to, now you have to live by it. Then...Then we’ll talk about forgiveness...” The second son of Sunset Savannah blinked his tears away the best he could. Leona’s words were just as much for himself as they were for his father. But he had to hold onto his anger, his injustice in this moment. He had to. Otherwise, they’d just end up back here or worse. His throat tightened with the effort of his next words, voice turning almost as horse as his father’s.

“So you better live a long time, Your Majesty...You have a lot to make up for.”

Nia let out a small, open-mouthed sob at his son’s words. Raising on hand ladened with tape and intravenous equipment to lay atop his son’s. He flinched at the chill of his father’s touch, but Nia didn’t mind. How could he when his son gave him such an ultimatum? Ah, Tumaini...What a gift you gave me. What a wonderful man your son has grown to be. That he would want the man responsible for his tragedies to live...How proud the King was. How devastated. The King of Sunset Savannah, Nia the Victorious of the fifth house of Kingscholar could only nod at his second son’s words, unsure if the tremor of their grasped hands came from him or Leona.

“Of course, my son, of course.”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MERCH

SETTING SUN - SIDE CHEKA

By Soru

Something was off, Cheka noted with Mr. Pimbi (his favourite warthog) tucked under his arm as he roamed the open-air halls of the palace. The place was silent when it was supposed to be bustling and loud, and even his mother, who normally joined him on his walks, was nowhere to be seen. The servants whispered of the King's ill health,and of the scorned son being personally summoned, not that Cheka really understood.

Shaking his head with all the innocence and bouncing curls of a five year old child (as he often saw his father do when he and his mother would do 'serious adult talk'), Cheka continued on his walk, silently reaching to hold Mr. Pimbi's cotton hand. It would do for now, until Uncle Leona reached home. Uncle Leona would come back home though... right?

A little while later, Cheka heard the guards near the front gates yell at each other. A guest, maybe? Or someone annoying who kept staring at him and his curls with a smile Uncle Leona called 'shitty', even though mama- no, mother told him that bad words weren't allowed. Regardless, Cheka ducked behind one of the ornate bushes near the entrance, waiting to see who it was. A black limousine with his father's symbol, Cheka whispered to Mr. Pimbi as Mr. Pimbi nodded and shuddered in like with him. This was someone important.

Out of the limousine stepped Kifaji first, and something heavy settled in Cheka's throat that he couldn't quite place. Kifaji walked to the backseat doors solemnly, opening the door to reveal a tall man with a long, dark mane, and whatever the heavy thing was vanished with a heavy sigh of relief. Uncle Leona's home! Mr. Pimbi cheered as Cheka put a finger on his lips. What's wrong, Cheka?

Uncle Leona is... not happy. Cheka whispered back as heavy, suffocating, and ominous footsteps thudded their way towards the ornate doors of the royal palace. But he's never happy, Cheka! He doesn't like coming here. Mr. Pumbi responded, with all the seriousness of Cheka's father. And Cheka doesn't bother giving Mr. Pimbi a response- I know. But this time, it's different.

All Mr. Pimbi does is shrug without saying a word for or against Cheka's intuition, and Cheka pouts a little before he stuffs his friend under his arm again and crawls out of the bush, swiping off leaves that were entangled in his hair, and resumes his walk with all the innocence of a five year old boy. Cheka doesn't really know what that innocence is supposed to be. He's only ever heard Uncle Leona say it once or twice, when he allowed Cheka into his room, and by extension, his presence.

When Cheka sees his mother, eyes wide with worry and confusion and pretty brown hair slightly lighter than Uncle Leona's mussed, he tilts his chubby head a little and smiles as his mother scowls and asks him if he'd been diving into the bushes again. "Your uncle is back home again," his mother starts as she kneels on one knee, picks the hem of her Dawning-imported gown and rubs off smudges of mud Cheka and Mr. Pimbi must've missed on the walk back. "Don't roam around him too much this time, okay? Your babu called for him, which means Leona will have lots of adult work to do."

Cheka nods, even though he doesn't really quite get it, and his mother sighs fondly- a successful mission, because he kept all the innocence of a five year old boy.

—

True to her words as always, Cheka's mother was right- he doesn't catch sight of his uncle at all, only watching him from afar at lunch and dinner when he cuts through his meat with hurried ferocity, snarling at any attempts his baba-no, father- makes at placating him. His mother, who would normally either scold him or chuck a slipper between them to stop the arguing, merely purses her lips with dissatisfaction and stays silent, and not even Mr. Pumbi offers any piece of advice.

Your Uncle Leona will leave and never come back! Best we find him soon! Mr. Pimbi repeats for the fourth time since his uncle came home, and Cheka feels the slight need to put him back in his own bed in the closet with the other toys, annoyed with his comments. Shush, Mr. Pimbi, I know that! But I can't find him anywhere! Cheka whispers back in the safety of his own room, the large golden curtains shoved aside by bibi Eshe before he slept. May the moon and the tides lull you to sleep, shielded from the silence outside, my Prince, she smiled before patting his head and shutting the door silently, but he doesn't really feel 'lulled'.

In fact, he feels nothing at all.

Oh, stop moping around! I know where we can start looking!! Mr. Pimbi starts, attempting to leap out of Cheka's bed but instead flopping to the floor pathetically as Cheka chuckles. You do? He asks as Mr. Pimbi nods. We can go to the West Wing, Mr. Pimbi groans as he tries to lift himself up and fails, Cheka picking him gently. Uncle Leona stays there, right? We're big, we can go to the West Wing library or his bedroom to look!

But what about the guards? If they catch us, they'll tell mama and baba. Cheka reasons, biting his lip (an 'indecent' and 'ugly' habit he picked up from one of Uncle Leona's friends). They won't know if we stay super, super quiet, right? If we wait any longer, we won't be able to meet Uncle Leona for the rest of the day, so we have to run!! Mr. Pimbi urges as Cheka sighs and opens his door on the tips of his toes, turning the knob around to find no one there.

Go, go, Cheka! Mr. Pimbi urges as Cheka shuts the door behind him as slowly and quietly as possible and makes his way to the grand hall downstairs, the only way to access the West Wing. On the way, they encounter very few guards-the first sign of something being off. It's okay, Cheka! Uncle Leona will protect us. Mr. Pimbi repeated as Cheka mumbled it under his breath, climbing the stairs at the other end of the hall as quickly as he could before reaching his uncle's designated corridor, a room with the door barely open having its lights still on. And from in it, his baba and mama's voices, mixed with one deeper and angrier.

"I don't care!" Cheka heard Leona burst out after a few seconds of silence. "You want your time to grieve? Take your time. Not mine."

"Brother, I-" Farena attempts to speak, but is shushed by Cheka's mother. "Listen to your brother."

"I don't need you buttin' in here."

"I'm not." his mother stands her ground. "Farena has a habit of speaking at the wrong time. This is something you've held onto your chest for years, little brother. Speak freely."

Before Leona can speak, however, Farena steps outside for some water, and catches Cheka scampering. Shutting the door behind him to maintain the thin semblance of peace in that room, he walks a little way away from the door before calling for Cheka.

"What are you doing here?" right now, he is not Cheka's benevolent and clumsy and loving baba, he is the Crown Prince. Cheka hates the Crown Prince. "Cheka." his wrist, small enough to be covered in one hand, is grabbed harshly, and Mr. Pimbi falls to the ground. "Answer me. Why are you not in bed?" He hates this side of his baba- this side is harsh and ugly and mean, to everyone, even him and mama. "Cheka."

“I- I wanted to see Uncle Leona,” Cheka whispers with as much courage as he can muster, but he can also see that the answer displeases his father, as golden-red eyes narrow with suspicion and mistrust. They told you to stay away from Uncle Leona. Why did you tell the truth? However, whatever he was expecting to happen did not, and Farena let go of his son’s wrists. “Go back to bed, Cheka.”

The next morning, he wakes up surrounded by a retinue of guards.

—

The guards refuse to leave him alone, even though he knows better than to try that trick again. Cheka is rarely left unaccompanied, and his mother, who normally talks to him at breakfast, refuses to look him in the eye. Farena, who was boisterous, was silent, and Uncle Leona wasn’t even there. Tears prick the corner of Cheka’s eyes, and after some silent eating, he pushes the plate away from him. “I’m done. Thanks for the meal!” Despite his parents’ questioning eyes (for when has he eaten so little?) Cheka doesn’t bother looking back at his parents- there’s nothing they can do or say.

Once again, the guards laugh at the joke cracked outside his door, and uncle Leona is nowhere to be seen. Mr. Pimbi sits solemnly by Cheka’s side as he flops onto his back on his bed, the golden curtains moved aside by bibi last night. She wasn’t granted access to him today, his father mentioning that bibi was maybe part of a group of people who wanted to hurt babu and Uncle Leona, and so she shouldn’t be near him anymore. Cheka disagreed, but according to his father,

Cheka wasn’t old enough to understand. And so, he sits here, waiting for something to happen.

A knock on his door a few (several) minutes later drags him out of his forced stupor. “Cheka?” his mother calls as she walks into his room. “Oh.” she starts, brows furrowed gently, brown eyes filled with something Cheka can’t quite recognise yet. “I’m sorry. I know you’re confused.” Cheka’s eyes fill with unshed tears as he hides his face from the world in his mother’s chest. “But right now, Uncle Leona just needs some space.”

Cheka sniffles. “I want to say hi. That’s all,” he repeats, his voice muffled by his mother's dress as she smiles a weary smile. “I know, I know.” is all she says as she ruffles his hair. “But he needs time. You’ll understand when you get a little older.” Cheka’s not sure he wants to understand.

“Your baba is also really scared,” his mother’s voice starts from somewhere above him, larger hands gently wrapping themselves around his torso to shield him. Cheka shakes his head again before whispering a simple “I’m scared of baba too.”.

—

If there’s anything Farena would want to say about Leona’s entire... distance from Cheka to the little boy right now, it is about how little Cheka resembles him. Though the entire parliament denies it, it is clearer than the cloudless summer skies of the savannah- Cheka’s personality is entirely Leona’s, though his brother may not remember it being so.

When mother was alive, muses Farena in his room’s balcony, watching Leona from above mess around with the bushes of an area that was rumoured to have been destroyed by their father a long time ago. Leona was different. Kinder. Softer. Quieter. All of which Cheka is. Even though he doesn’t know how to say it, Farena knows with all of his heart how he wronged his son that night. But Cheka’s been avoiding him like

the plague ever since.

In his son, he sees his brother, and sometimes, he wants to laugh, for maybe this is the universe's way of giving him another chance. "If I don't ignore Cheka like I did Leona when I was younger, maybe he would turn out better." he whispers to the wisps of the wind floating past him.

"Maybe." his wife's voice answers behind him as Farena jumps out of his skin. "What? You didn't hear me come in? You're growing old already, slow down a little. Cheka's not even 10."

"No, I didn't hear you," Farena confirms with a heavy sigh as his wife, the love of his life, comes to hug him from behind. "I was just thinking about what Councillor Kobe mentioned when Cheka was about a year old- that-"

"That Cheka resembles Leona more than he resembles you? I remember," his wife starts, making her way by his side in the balcony overseeing the Great Pride Rock. "It was something horrendous to say- at least, that's how your father treated it. But I think it's a good thing. If anything, he won't inherit just your charm and looks, he'll also inherit the brains of the family, which is currently restricted to Leona alone."

"Mm," Farena concurs before laughing heartily. "Leona did inherit all the brains, huh? I think that's a core reason why baba dismissed him so- Leona had 'little charm' but plenty of intelligence, and having a dumb but pliant Crown Prince makes it easier for everyone." Suddenly bitter, Farena shakes his head rapidly, letting the curls he inherited from his father (and gave to Cheka, his only son, by extension) bounce violently. "Anyway, what are you here for? Need something in particular?"

"Nothing, really." she responds. "Just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"What about Cheka?"

"He is... scared. Of you, of the situation. Would you consider talking to him?"

"He doesn't need any explanation right now- I will talk to him later."

"If you say so. But don't make the same mistakes your father made with Leona."

Farena stays silent.

—

When Cheka decides to roam the gardens of the royal palace again, he decides to leave Mr. Pimbi behind. No matter how much he protested and how much Cheka's heart ached for one of his closest friends, too many bad decisions had been made. It will never do for the rising sun to behave so poorly, Prince Cheka. But Cheka doesn't really get to think about what that means before a strange shadow falls over him, and the scent of his uncle's magic surrounds him. "Unca Leona!"

"Hey, brat." His uncle doesn't smile, but his scent is relaxed, not quite as on edge as he normally is. "I thought you weren't allowed here."

"I'm not, but as long as I bring a guard like baba told me, I'm allowed!" Cheka doesn't miss the way his uncle's tail starts swishing slowly, and he doesn't miss the way his uncle's hand simply dismisses the guard before gesturing for Cheka to follow him.

"This was bibi's garden," he starts, sitting down on the mud and grass, uncaring for the silks mama would scold him for dirtying. "Your grandmother, and my mother. She would have loved this garden." Cheka also sits beside him, and waits. Uncle Leona never speaks to him without purpose. Therefore, this was a lesson in a story that the other adults

didn't want him to know. "Did anyone try telling you about what kind of King you were supposed to be?"

"Mhm! Bibi Eshe did."

"What did she tell you?"

"She told me that a good King is like the waves, always there for his people, but the best King is like the moon, someone who works hard in the dark for his people. Looking good is not everything."

"That's right."

"Is that why you're angry with baba?"

"Mhm. But I've decided to see how he earns my forgiveness. When you get older, not everything can be decided with a 'sorry' and a handshake. Remember that."

"Okay, Unca Leona!"

"You're oddly enthusiastic about this lecture I'm giving you."

"Bibi Eshe also said that everyone says I'm like you." A pause. "And so I'll be the greatest King to ever live. I don't think so, because my feet can't reach the floor from the throne yet!"

"Well, when that happens, you'll be a great king." And for maybe the first time in his little, little life, Cheka finds no anger behind that statement.

@Vauxxnm

TAKE YOUR FILL, AND MINE TOO

By QuillAffinity, Content warning: contains **discussion of a suicide attempt**. Read with care. If you are struggling, please reach out to any hot line or resources available in your country. The Prince's Uprising team encourages you to seek the help you need. Better days are ahead 💛

Pride is a worthless thing.

It can't feed you, keep a roof over your head, and, most importantly, it can't earn money for you. So what was the use of something like that? Maybe if Ruggie had grown up never needing or worrying about his next meal, he might've savored in pride, in dignity. But fate deemed it never to be.

So he stole and scrounged and pawned and purloined all his life. To feed his grandmother, to buy clothes for his siblings, to house the ragged children around him so that they didn't have to do the same. Or, at the very least, not as often. But just because that was Ruggie Bucchi's barren lot in life, doesn't mean he was resigned to it.

Far from it.

Sunset Savannah, despite the King of Beast's best efforts, wasn't kind to hyena beastmen like him and his family. So it was only right that Ruggie was just as unkind. The very worst things Ruggie did, of course, he kept from his grandmother.

Though she was certainly smart enough to guess where his bruises came from and where knocked teeth fell, she never asked. Just pointed him towards their meager medicine cabinet with a heavy look. He never wanted to worry her, but perhaps that's what family was. The people who worry about you when everyone else doesn't even spare you a glance.

But when that acceptance letter came? That letter, found atop Ruggie's nightstand amongst scattered crow feathers on thick, creamy paper sealed with a sleek purple ribbon below a glittering gold wax seal, made his grandmother weep in a way the young man hadn't seen in years. Happy, elated tears flowed over her wrinkled cheeks with such fervor, that you'd never guess water was hard to come by in their neighborhood. She wept about her pride in him and, for the first time, Ruggie felt that maybe pride wasn't such a worthless thing after all.

—

-A gilded quill pen-

If you had told Ruggie two months before his admittance into the Night Raven College (an already unbelievable feat) that he'd become the gopher of the Second Sun of the Kingdom of Sunset Savannah - he'd have spent days laughing at you, and probably taken your wallet to boot.

But here he was, doing just that.

Don't get it twisted. It wasn't as if Ruggie had been unprepared to schmooze his way to the top. Quite the opposite, the hyena had vowed to milk this opportunity for all it was worth. To rub elbows with all manner of princelings and trust fund babies as much as possible to wring every cent he could get outta them - dignity be damned. But Leona Kingscholar? THE Leona Kingscholar.

Prince of his nation. Richer than Ruggie could even imagine. He had everything the hyena could and couldn't think of wanting, with more power in his pinky than Ruggie had in his entire life. With such a blessed life, why come to Night Raven College at all? The question was, admittedly, on the tip of his tongue, but the hyena had gotten the sense that Leona was the type of guy where asking questions led to clipped

opportunities. Thus jeopardizing his bag. And if ever there was a singular truth that Ruggie wholeheartedly believed in this world, it was to never jeopardize the bag.

Ever.

So a gopher he became. It wasn't particularly difficult work, just tedious: picking up lunch here and there, turning in assignments on his behalf, listening in to a conversation or two, grabbing him a drink on a hot day. A lot of back and forth that a lifetime of scavenging had prepared Ruggie for. In terms of payment, His Royal Highness was generous. But not the sort of generosity that came from pity or a need to be kind. Nah. Leona, honest to the Seven, just couldn't tell the price of objects or labor for the life of him.

Case in point, Ruggie was currently on his way back to the Savanaclaw Dormitory with a chilly carton of Earl Gray milk tea as per his housewarden's request. And what had Leona, an actual prince, given him to pay for a carton only slightly bigger than a juice box? Twenty madol. Twenty madol...for a three madol drink.

Now, if the hyena beastman hadn't learned to count by pointing to the visible rib lines on his stomach, maybe a sense of morality would've prompted him to return the remaining change to his benefactor.

But no.

Morality, even more so than pride, was a luxury. After all, if you can afford to never work at a certain place or buy something deemed 'wrong', what a status symbol that was! Options! Actual options other than eat or die, submit or die! What else was that aside from a privilege?

Crossing through the dormitory mirror, Ruggie was greeted with the dry, familiar heat of the Savanaclaw's homey little dimension. The hyena thought Night Raven College would only have stuffy, aristocratic living quarters so as to not offend the many pampered little trust funds they've elected to enroll. But the Savanaclaw Dormitories stood in proud opposition to that. His heart would always be home with his grandmother and siblings, but living somewhere so alike to Sunset Savannah certainly helped with homesickness. Ruggie knocked once, twice on his Housewarden's door, located in the highest spot in all the dorm, receiving nothing but silence in response.

"Leona! I'm back with your drink!" Ruggie called out as he opened Leona's perpetually unlocked door. The hyena was half sure the spoiled lion didn't even lock it at night! It was midday and strong sunlight streamed through the glass-free latticed windows of his housewarden's large single room. The space was easily larger than Ruggie's home back in Sunset Savannah and left a far more comfortable temperature by the winds slinking inside through the large, open balcony to the left of the massive bed to the far right of the room.

And, sprawled out somewhat haphazardly on top of said bed, was the illustrious Housewarden of Savanaclaw, Leona Kingscholar. Snoring away without a care or thought in the world. And not the soft kind of snoring either! Ruggie believed it was nothing short of a mercy from the Great Seven themselves that all Housewarden rooms were soundproof, otherwise, he was sure no one in Savanaclaw would be able to sleep with Leona practically snarling with every breath.

Ruggie sighed before making his way deeper into Leona's room. At this point, he knew the layout better than his own. He had placed the milk tea into the minifridge near the work desk when the hyena noticed something. Something shiny, glinting atop a neat stack of untouched textbooks.

A gold quill pen.

One of the really nice ones with a real owl feather plume and razor-sharp quill tip, etched with delicate, vine-like designs. Designer insignia stamped right above the tip and everything. It was the kind of pointlessly

nice, everyday thing that would easily go for twenty-five to thirty madol. Enough to eat at least one really good meal at the Night Raven College cafeteria. And it was just...sitting there.

Temptingly.

Leona's snores echoed all throughout the room, a repetitive thrum of bass completely ignorant to the world. Ruggie looked up, just to make sure. His Housewarden's back faced him, toned sides oscillating up and down with every even breath he made. The very picture of unsuspecting.

The hyena sighed. Life really was unfair. But that didn't mean that Ruggie would take those awful cards lying down. Far from it. He swore just as much the day his dad up and disappeared on his own family. He'd get ahead, he'd become successful. No matter what.

So he left.

If Leona needed him, he'd call. He always did. It was warmer and less windy outside of the Housewarden's room. Maybe Ruggie would get a drink from the dormitory kitchen before taking the laundry out to the clotheslines to dry. Then, if he hurried, he'd have enough time to visit Sam's before spelldrive practice.

That quill wasn't gonna sell itself, after all.

—

-An old notebook with Intro to Alchemy notes-

Ruggie knew he was a smart guy. He knew how to hotwire both a car and motorcycle. He knew what exact angle you had to tilt a television antenna to get the clearest picture. He even knew how to get a tomato sauce stain out of a white shirt. Practical knowledge, he's your man. But Intro to Alchemy? Nope. Nu-uh.

Not a chance

He needed help. And, looking at his whooping score of 45 on his chemical table test, he needed help badly. Professor Crewel had given him an earful and a half on 'applying' himself, but just how was Ruggie supposed to do that when everything the guy said went through one ear and out the other? Sure, he jumped at the chance to take the class in his first semester but that was before he knew the whole 'turning lead into gold' only happened in the later half of Intermediate Alchemy for second-years.

The problem was that Ruggie didn't know how to go about asking someone to tutor him. He didn't really know anyone in his class like that. The other homerooms had prodigies like the new Heartslabyul Housewarden and that weird merfolk guy with feral-looking eyes and sharp teeth. And the prospect of being indebted to either was far from appealing to the hyena. Coupled with the fact that Leona's been getting fussier and fussier with the Interdorm Spelldrive Tournament coming up. It was sink or swim. But when hadn't his life been like that?

His phone beeped.

It was an ancient, cheap little thing, but by the grace of the Great Seven, it could still receive a text. Most times. Ruggie sighed before pulling it out. It had been a long day, and he had just gotten out of an unsuccessful bout of studying in the Night Raven College Library. At this point, he was gonna need textbooks for his textbooks. It took a minute for Ruggie to click through his phone's different screens before selecting his messages app.

PayPal Prince: i left my sunglasses in my room

pick them up before coming to practice

Ruggie rolled his eyes. Of course. Turning on his heel, the hyena beastman made his way back towards the Savanaclaw Dorm. Rearranging his already busy schedule in his head, he replied to his Housewarden.

Ruggie: idk bossman it might take a while to find them... 😓

PayPal Prince: they're in my room

Ruggie: and have you SEEN your room?

its gonna take me ages to find it in all that mess! 😱

Paypal Prince: ugh fine, 10 madol for getting it here quickly

Ruggie: uhhhhh

Paypal Prince: 15 madol and extra for cleaning my room

Ruggie: No problem BossMan! ✨

Naturally, and like any good businessman, Ruggie waited till his email dinged with the payment notification from one 'k.scholar' to one very broke hyena. He laughed to himself. It didn't matter how busy he got or how hard he had to work, Ruggie was gonna make something of himself. And, yeah, sure one hyena yapping injustice in a kingdom full of lions and elephants didn't amount to much, but money talked louder than he ever would.

Leona's room was, as usual, a mess, but if Ruggie kept pestering his housewarden about it, maybe they'd work out a cleaning arrangement. For a premium price of course. Ruggie tossed pile after pile of clothes into the housewarden's hamper when he heard it.

Clat-clup-click! Thud!

A pair of designer sunglasses clattered at Ruggie's feet.

Yes! He tossed the shirt he shook it out of into the hamper, bending down to pick it up when he noticed that something else had fallen next to his houswarden's sunglasses. A worn, but high-quality composition book. Scrawled atop its front cover in Leona's princely scrawl were the words "Intro to Alchemy"

Lucky him!

—

-An extra long phone call-

Things have been pretty shit lately.

Classes are fine. Work has been fine. Even the people he feels okay with calling his friends in his head are fine. Ruggie? Himself?

Not fine.

That's why he's here, in the dark of night, hunkered down in his dorm's lounge. Hiding like the thief he was. What'd he steal this time, you ask? A gift card Crowley had given to Leona as... congratulations for earning Second Place in the Interdorm Spelldrive Tournament. It was still clutched in his sweaty hands, despite having been completely drained already.

Ruggie's right leg bounced up and down, practically shaking with nervous energy. He could be caught like this. He was completely exposed like this. Anybody could stop by the kitchens for a glass of water, regardless of how well the cover of night hid him. His instincts screamed at him to hide, to act like everything was fine. But he shared a room with two other first-years and just needed a minute, a single minute, in the cool night air. Ruggie breathed in as deeply as he could, trying to relax as he dialed that familiar number he'd had been avoiding.

The line rang once, twice....thrice then-

Click!

"Ruggie? My baby?" His grandmother's voice was a little grainy, but as husky and warm as always. If a little confused at the sudden call.

"Hey Granny! Did I wake you?" Ruggie's voice pitched awkwardly. His

throat tight, almost painfully so.

“No, baby. I just wasn’t expecting you...is everything alright cubby?” How long had it been since his grandmother had called him that? How long had it been since he heard her voice? Ruggie swallowed, trying to collect himself.

“I’m doing well in all my classes, don’t worry! I’m eating well and working, so I’ve been a little busy and didn’t have time to call until now. Sorry for worrying you, shishihihi.” Lying to her felt like swallowing cold oil, but what was the alternative? Let her worry about her only blood relative when he’s supposed to be the one who ‘made it out’? The one who's supposed to take care of her instead of the other way around?

Silence.

“Cubby, you work so hard, and I am so thankful, so proud of you.” Ruggie’s eyes dampened and he tried to swallow another mouthful of lies as his grandmother continued. She never missed the mark, did she?

“My only wish, before my time comes to join the stars, is that you live a life you can be proud of. If that means you are rich, then I shall pray for your wealth every day. If that means you are safe, then I shall banish any evil that clings to you.” Ruggie dipped his head forward, lips pressed tightly together. The plastic little card in his hands bent uselessly from the force of his grip on it.

Did he feel bad taking it? No. No, instead what made his heart ache worse than any hunger pangs was the fact that his grandmother only wanted him to be happy. Happy meant security. Happy meant money in his warthog and his family fed. He’d hunt down every opportunity. Dog-pile on any prey. Snap any muscle or break any bones to make that dream, that vision happen. Nowhere in that image was there room for him, Ruggie knew that.

And that was just fine.

“How can I not worry over you, Ruggie? Silly cub. You are my baby, my life. Where you go, my heart goes.” The young hyena made a pained noise his grandmother could definitely hear. But Ruggie didn’t care. He just held that cheap little phone closer as he sobbed.

“Granny, I’m sorry...I’m sorry, I lied. We lost our Spelldrive Tournament, we lost really badly. And I-” All the stress, all the worry he’d been keeping at bay by working his body to the bone just came crumbling down in one brutal admission.

The Spelldrive loss had been total. Unquestionable. Not a single point on Savanaclaw’s side in the final round, not a single table scrap for all their blood, sweat, and tears. Their decades-long winning streak amongst NRC dorms, over. Just like that. Ruggie had tried. He’d pushed himself to the damn limit and it still wasn’t enough.

And it's not like it was just the disappointment surrounding the tournament that brought the hyena beastman to this point. He felt overwhelmed in class, lost in the sea of those who learned Pythagorean theories instead of fighting to survive. He felt small and slow amongst the larger apex members of the Spelldrive club who never knew how mold tastes as it bloomed in their mouths. He felt talked over, invisible but those who society never told to shut up and just take it. A poor, dirty little thing who deluded himself into believing he could ever mean something. On and on he confessed his misery to his grandmother. Ruggie couldn’t stop.

Neither could his tears.

Had he not taken that gift card, this call would’ve never been possible. Leona’s so-called ‘winnings’ were paying for every minute Ruggie could grasp onto the one lifeline he had to hope. The hyena couldn’t care less if his housewarden caught him. Let him. Let that pampered prince finally connect the dots and figure out the runty scavenger at his beck and call had the stickiest fingers imaginable. He

didn't care anymore. It was only when Ruggie's throat felt raw from sobs and confessions did he muffle himself. Sniffling now and then like a kid. Shit. Fuck. And to think he had thought himself a changed person, a better per-

"Ruggie."

His grandmother's voice was sharp, even under the strain of her own tears. And, oh, he knew that tone. Familiarly threatening, sharply warm. The kind of tone she used to use whenever she found extra cash around the house. Ruggie almost wanted to laugh at the rush of comfort it brought.

"Ruggie Bucchi, you are allowed to fail, you are allowed to lose...and I am sorry that life has given you the impression you can't. You must know that failure is only true when you refuse to give up, and that is not the sweet baby I have raised." Ruggie let out a sad bark of a laugh.

"Whatever you do, I want you to remember two things. Understand? One, I love you more than anything. Myself and all the little ones here adore you with all our hearts. We see your efforts and cannot be more thankful for them." He heard his grandmother sniffle into her handkerchief, voice only trembling slightly in the face of her grandson's hurt and pain.

"Two, if no one is going to make space for you, you must make room for yourself...At the very least, I want you to be able to live for-"

A long beep then-

"Your call has been disconnected due to the expiration of your prepaid minutes. To reload please input alternative payment after the-"

Ruggie sighed.

His phone slipped from his hand, clattering onto the floor. Breaking in half on the wooden planks beneath him. He held his head in his hand, hyperaware of every callous and scar he had on them. Ruggie stayed like that for a long moment, thoughts screaming in the silence. Eventually, his mouth began moving in tandem with his thoughts.

"I can do this. I can do this. I can do this."

—

-Various pieces of jewelry-

Ruggie got better in his second year.

Better, smarter, with a thicker skin to boot. He could do this. He had to. That's what he told himself every time the pressure of his situation threatened to knock him off the tenuous tightrope that was his life at NRC. Especially now that Leona finally had some light behind his eyes again, and, Sevens, was he planning something big. With Ruggie right by his side.

He had made himself indispensable to the prince and, as such, got front-row, special treatment to what Leona had in store for one Malleus Draconia. But he wasn't gonna stop at Briar Valley's heir apparent. Oh no. Leona swore to him, promised him that Malleus would be the first step of tearing down these damn hierarchies. First, Malleus, then the Sunset Council, then Crown Prince Farena, himself. On and on until equality, true equality, would be achieved.

Ruggie never thought he'd ever feel such a strong sense of kinship with his housewarden. Sure, he appreciated Leona's generous contributions to his retirement fund, but he never thought the lion beastman would invite him to commit what was, essentially, a coup. Don't get him wrong though, Ruggie knew Leona's plan was dangerous and the risk of retaliation should they fail or be found out was great.

But that was the great thing about growing up desperate and starved. It taught you that if there was a chance, just one chance, no matter how

slim, that you could sink your fangs into the jugular of that which would feed you...you take it. You leap. You bite. You bite down hard.

And let the blood flow.

Still, a guy's gotta eat. He's still got a family to feed, so the stealing and pawning continued. Ruggie didn't know if he should've been thankful or startled at how few questions Sam asked every time Ruggie showed up with something that was too nice to be his own to sell to the mysterious man. But the hyena beastman couldn't really trust anyone else with this particular side business of his. So on and on their little arrangement went.

Leona had always been careless with his things, which meant Ruggie had to be careful. The incident with Jack and that stupid necklace was the closest he came to being caught, but even then, his nation's prince was blasé at best. Ear cuffs, bracelets, hair ornaments, braid cuffs, strings of rare coral, spiral hair ornaments embedded with rough-cut gems, and more. Ruggie only took what he could hide. What he couldn't hide, he took that which he could deny.

Like that, he made enough to ensure he kept up with his new phone payments. Enough to eat well. Enough to fund other side businesses. Enough to send some home via food or cash on occasion. Enough to feel like he was making progress.

But that wasn't enough.

He wanted more. And Ruggie was going to get more. So who cared how dark his magic pen got with blot? Who cares how many well-fed white boys had to fall down a couple of stairs? How many unscared hands get cut? How many fights he had to orchestrate or distrust he had to sow? If he had to outrun a shrimpy little perfect and a pair of bumbling card soldiers every day for a month, so be it. Ruggie would do all that and more if it meant he could crawl out of the frigid shadow of poverty. That long, suffocating darkness that frightened him more than

the thought of overblotting ever did.

Even Leona didn't seem worried.

So what was there to worry about? What was there to keep the hyena up at night, staring at a starving crescent moon in the sky as if they could understand each other? If Leona, an actual prince and ringleader of all this madness, wasn't concerned, neither would he. And yet...the way Leona seemed to change the closer their plans came to fruition never left his mind. Never failed to send a tremor through his heart or a shiver down his spine. Not that he let any of it slip to Leona's notice.

He wasn't eating as much, which left more food for Ruggie. He stopped going outside of his room if it wasn't for practice or keeping up the bare minimum of appearances, which left Ruggie with more free time away from his usual, tedious work. He even stopped policing the fights and arguments among his underclassmen, which gave Ruggie the perfect opportunity to pickpocket a wallet or two in the hubbub. It was great. Perfect, even.

Yet Ruggie worried.

Which was stupid, he knew. Here the hyena was, stealing the lavish scraps off his plate one minute, and worrying about Leona the next. But it wasn't out of any sense of pity. Rather, the look in his housewarden's eyes never failed to make his hackles raise. Dull with this sharp fang-glint of obsessive desperation. The kind he'd definitely need to tear down a monarchy or two but...Ruggie's instincts said it was more than that. Deeper. Darker.

Lightless as ink.

Unknown as the potion Leona gave him.

—

<Blot>

After the sand settled, it took Ruggie longer than it should've to figure it out.

Maybe he hadn't want to consider it. Maybe he couldn't understand why it happened the way it did. Or maybe he really did know why Leona did it, in his gut, in his heart, and just didn't want to acknowledge it at the moment.

"Do you want to die?"

Leona's back stiffens, as he turns to Ruggie slowly. He's still recovering. There are bags under his eyes that hadn't been there before. His skin has lost its luster and his hands and feet are ashy and rough from the sand. Not bothering to lick his wounds. There's something furious in his gaze as he looks back at the hyena, a half-finished chess game in front of him. But Ruggie isn't scared. Not of him.

Not like that.

"...What? That's none of your-"

"Shut the fuck up."

Leona's sharp-fanged jaws close with a sharp click. He's staring at Ruggie so intensely to the point where, had anyone else been in Leona's room with them, they'd think the lion beastman was seconds away from ripping Ruggie's throat out. But the hyena knew he wouldn't. He didn't dare. Ruggie's voice lowered, more growl than speech.

"I gave you the chance to give me an answer, a real answer. Now you're gonna shut up and listen to me for once." Silence.

"You had no right. No right at all, you...you stupid, arrogant little prince! You had no right to take my blot from me and then try to kill yourself with it." Was it out of fear that Ruggie raised his voice? Fear that he was nearly responsible for the death of his nation's prince? Fear that Leona knew using Laugh With Me would result in an overblot and just decided not to tell him? Ruggie just stares at his housewarden, fangs exposed, face hot.

Leona's face twists. Worse than when he's faced with a bowl of vegetables. He could still taste the bitter, metallic blot that filled his mouth and the thick, oily potion from Octavinelle that allowed the switch to happen only days prior. But he had to keep his eyes on Ruggie's face now, lest he catch a glimpse of the dried, scarred skin on the hyena's arm.

"Pretty ironic that you, of all people, are yapping to me about that, Ruggie."

"...What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

Ruggie felt the room tilt for several long seconds. Leona knew. He knew. Of course, he knew. He just...let Ruggie think he won. Let him steal the little baubles he designated to leave out for his sticky fingers and hungering greed. He let Ruggie believe he had the power to fight against his fate with his own two hands. That he-

"So what now," Ruggie snarled, bone-breaking teeth on full display. "You gonna report me? Gonna have me tried by the Sunset Council? Gonna brand me as the thief?"

Leona's ears flattened back.

"...I saw you, you know. That day you stole that stupid gift card to call your grandmother. You were too busy pouring your heart out to notice but...I heard you. I heard her." His response was slow, careful. Ruggie's heart damn near stopped. He felt as if he'd been flattened onto his back, pale belly exposed for lion's claws to sink into.

"Nothing you've done, nothing you want to do, has been for yourself. You bust your ass trying to live every day, but don't even have the courage

to do it for yourself." Unkind, but not untrue. Leona broke eye contact first, looking out towards the bright blue sky beyond the confines of his room's windows. Ever the king without a crown.

"So I...I didn't want that effort wasted. That's all."

Ruggie stared at his housewarden. He felt seen in a way he wasn't used to. Thieves like him aren't supposed to be seen. To be brought under such a bright light and picked apart. It pissed him off, honestly, in a way only Leona could. The kind of anger that made you want to punch him in his princely little face. The kind of fury that made you promise yourself to be better, if only by a little bit.

And yet...yet in an awful, self-destructive way, Leona had saved his life. The Prince of his nation willingly opted to trade his life for a thieving hyena. Make no mistake though. Ruggie was still pissed the hell off. He was angry at being used and seemingly discarded at the tournament. He was angry that he'd probably have to use that expensive, high-moisture lotion on his arm for at least a year. He was enraged at the prospect of Leona manipulating him, not for his or Savanaclaw's benefit. But for his demise. And he was furious at Leona for embedding that fear into his heart. Digging into him like loose teeth getting caught on tough red meat.

So what now?

Tell the Prince in front of him to find another gopher? That he had every reason to never trust Leona again? Ruggie closed his eyes and took a long breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. His next words blunt as molars.

"Let's have a trade-off."

"Huh?"

"I'll swear that I'll figure out how to live for myself, if you swear to fulfill your promise to us hyenas-"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Ruggie's snarl easily broke through the bone of Leona's indignity.

"AND. And you swear to never try to kill yourself again."

Leona looked at him. Looked at this scrawny, runty little hyena that sold his possessions off without a care but still somehow dared to put the lion's money where his mouth was. Adding even more demands on top of that. Even going as far as to call out the worst of the second prince's thoughts. Dragging them from Leona's hidden depths and into the light. Were they friends, Leona suddenly thought. Before or after he flashed his fangs to said 'friend'?

Was this what having friends is like?

Someone wanted him to live. Had anyone told him that before? The Second Sun of Sunset Savannah couldn't remember. And yet, here he was, a twenty-year-old man getting his ass swindled by a seventeen-year-old hyena he had nearly killed not a week ago. This was crazy! Insane! And yet, even if Ruggie just saw him as an ATM, he never once doubted Leona could bring about change. Even when he was drowning in the ink-black depths of rejection. The lion beastman could only roar with golden laughter, looking back at his... acquaintance.

"You...You're too damn greedy, you know that?"

Ruggie smiled.

"You're damn right I am!"

NvrNimm
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THE PRINCE'S TREASURE

By Gisèle

When the final game came to a close, the bustling sound of the magift's players leaving the sports field made a racket that the leader had ironically still not gotten used to although he was the one planning those daily sessions every early morning since the past few years when he had become a dorm leader. He received a few waves and “Goodbye” from the club members passing next to him, and the howling from his dormmates who were too far away but wanted to bid him farewell as they retired to enjoy their afternoon. Perhaps were they too relaxed around him ever since his overblot, too much for his liking, not that he had the energy to scold them at the moment — or more like he wasn't in the mood as the memory of him agreeing that they were his idiots was too embarrassing for him to face their lack of manners. A sigh left his lips when the last players had left, even Ruggie, who would more often than not stay back with Leona had decided that it was his moment to dip out to who knew where. But Savanaclaw's dorm head was more than alright with it, taking it as the chance to let his unofficial right hand man get some introspection time. Or was it what he should call it, knowing that the hyena was most likely running around, doing errands for some spare money as he would usually do?

Not that he cared, eventually getting up, deciding that it was also time for him to leave as he didn't plan on napping now that the sun was getting higher in the sky with no sign of the weather warming up enough for his liking. The small yawn that flashed his fangs to the world was cut short the moment the hands stretching his lower back were met with the distinct lack of something. Something that got him to look at the loop keeping the yellow bandana tied around his waist. And indeed, it was missing, much to his frustration. A groan left his gritted teeth as he looked around the bench to see if, by any chance, it fell not too far away, but nothing worthy of note laid there, only the irregular pattern of the thin layer of sand that had been brushed along the wind greeted him.. Rubbing his already disheveled hair into a more complex mess of tangles, he played his day back in his mind, trying to see where he could have possibly lost it. But looking through his memories, he could only be grateful that he had lost it on the last school day of the week, leaving him a whole Saturday and Sunday to search instead of skipping classes which he knew his brother and Ruggie would nag him about the moment they heard about it again.

Once again stretching his back into shape, a habit that often got the small fur ball he had to call his nephew and the magicless student that had crashed the Entrance Ceremony to stare in awe — one would try to copy him as best as they could, small body struggling to follow suit as they would always tip over and fall, the other muttering something inaudible under their breath that he could barely hear besides few words that managed to never failed to make him frown, something akin to him acting like a petty house cat, he eventually walked back to his dorm to get his researches done as soon as possible for him to finally rest.

And he immediately set to it the moment he stepped foot within his bedroom, looking underneath the pile of clothes that had gathered during the short time Ruggie's attention had turned away. Although by “immediately,” it meant him looking at the small pyramid of fabric near the corner of his bed with enough disdain that one would wonder if he had the power to drill holes with just thoughts alone. And the lion

probably wished he could do so, at least to lessen the burden he had put onto himself with his own mistake, and at best to kick a few people, mainly Malleus, down their peg. After dozens of seconds, the staring battle between him and his clothes that seemingly lasted an eternity for them, he eventually made up his mind, crouching down so he could take each piece of fabric one by one, throwing them on the other side of the room.

While doing so, the hyena he placed as his unofficial vice dorm leader, had found the time to enter the room, pushing the door open with his shoulder as his arms were wrapped around the laundry basket he had taken with him to tidy up the room, preventing him from comfortably entering the room as he stumbled in with his back facing the bed. “Leona? I'm comin’ in, gotta clean up your mess. Hope you left a few coins for me to-” The moment he turned to look at the lion, Ruggie was struck down with surprise, making him stop dead in his tracks as if electrified. The string of clothes that were being thrown in the air followed one another in the same pattern, the rainbow-like arc crossing the bed coming to a stop the moment the 2nd year student had started to ramble when he stumbled inside the room. Not before long, Leona's head popped up from the other side of the bed, soft looking hair framing his face in a tangled mess as his ears were pressed back on his skull with an annoyance that wasn't so unfamiliar considering his personality. “Have you finally gone bankrupt?”

The dorm leader's growl didn't take long to be heard, the deep sound resonating all across the room and within Ruggie's body, but it didn't faze him, he would the last person to be intimidated by it, the one who had gotten used to it faster than Leona wouldn’t have liked to hear him admit. “What again?” Said lion stared at the hyena, eyes narrowing even more as the other merely sighed as he put the basket down.

“I don't see any reason why you’d clean on your own.” Ruggie stated immediately after, not wasting a moment to do his signature pose as he raised both forearms on each side of his chest while dropping his hand

defeatedly. He almost looked sad, which he most probably was as his main source of income, and the easiest yet, had probably disappeared without any prior notice. “Don't have a coin left to spare for me, ‘s that it?” The Prince couldn't continue with just staring, instead he closed his eyes, turning his head to leave a deep sigh that made the younger one perked up, popping an eye open during his pitiful show to see what the other was up to.

Seeing that there was no use for him to continue what he had started now that the hyena was here to continue the sorting, he took the chance to put a hand on the bed, pushing himself up with an easance that more than one person would envy. “The day I won't have any money left is the day you won't have to work anymore.” His words made Ruggie grumble under his breath, “rude much” was the only thing Leona could hear among the series of self-pitying complaints, not that he cared much, knowing that Ruggie wasn't one to hold grudges, or at least not against him.

But he tried to cut short the annoyance he felt, instead preferring to ask the Lion what got him the motivation to touch the pile of abandoned clothes. “Anyway, what gotchu so worked up?” Although the one he was addressing didn't reply back, instead he sat himself on the bed and closed his eyes seemingly pensive about something important. Seeing that it would take a while to get an answer, he took the basket he had previously discarded and moved to the new stack that Leona had created during the short hour he had taken his eyes away from him. And per his habits, he took each piece of clothing one by one, taking coins if there were any or looking for any shirt he could later ask the Prince to //dash// him, sometimes even shaking his head from side to side with a click of his tongue, disappointed to see that Leona was rich enough to refuse and discard clothes gifted by his family, a luxury he didn't have as he had grown in a precarious area that none would envy. “By the way, Cheka gave you something when he came by yesterday, right? He was gushing over something he had given to his “dearest uncle”.” He had only said it

to tease him, knowing that Leona hated being reminded of the nickname his nephew had bestowed upon him so zealously, but the way his dorm leader ever so slightly tensed up for a second didn't go unnoticed by the Ruggie whose curiosity started to grow.

“Something happen?” Even if this time Leona didn't act up, the 2nd year’s nosiness didn't drop, instead he slowly inched closer to the bed in search of any sign that could betray the other, whatever twitch or frown he could use against him.

Although the lion was facing away, he could still sense the hyena inching closer to him. “Nothing.” Oh he was playing the ‘I'm a man of few words to show charisma’ card — that's what Ruggie liked to refer to in his mind, those moments when his leader was supposedly too tired or pissed off to think about answering with fully formed sentences. So after he finished sorting the pile, he went to the one that still sat in front of Leona, basket in tow. He plopped down, facing him shamelessly as he continued his work with a fake innocence.

“Did you lose it?”

The question made him frown as he got up, and immediately the hyena knew that he had lost the game. His precious black mailing that could get him a (more like multiple if he used it the correct way) paid leave! He didn't want to kiss it goodbye so soon! But the way Leona stated at him, eyes slitted with annoyance that was directly casted towards Ruggie, it was certain that he could no longer dig inside his business. “I'll go somewhere quieter.” And he didn't wait before throwing his legs above the bed, pushing himself to the other side of the room so he could leave. The youngest of the two now sat defeatedly, not wasting his time by looking at the one leaving as he preferred to mop on the opportunity he had accidentally thrown away by guessing too close to what most probably happened that has gotten Leona so irritated.

The second place Leona was certain he could have lost the keychain was the botanical garden and as Ruggie was already cleaning the room, it was one less place to check, so he decided to move his research there. And treading along the path that led to the greenhouse, he carefully looked in the surrounding grass to see if anything shiny would luckily catch his eyes. Although luck was not something he could claim to have as it seemed that the moment he stepped out of the Hall of Mirrors, yet another one of his dorm members crossed paths with him. Them being Jack. The puppy-like student whose ears would always drop with disappointment whenever Leona failed to uphold the glamorous image he had of him.

The moment he decided to turn around, he was already halfway along the path and it pained him to do so, the wolf's ears rose up, chest puffing out as he approached the lion, forcing him to stop in his tracks. “Ah, Housewarden!” Said man closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath before looking once again at the boy with a bored glint overtaking his eyes, waiting for him to get closer before initiating anything from his own part. Jack, seeing this, jogged so he could get to him, still perked up and energetic, Leona making sure that every cell within his being was ready to interact with him. “Where are you heading to?” His tail started to wag with curiosity, something that didn't go unnoticed by any of the two, much to the shame of one, and the playfulness of the other.

But the amusement he felt quieted down quickly as he focused back on the question. “You came from the herbivore's house?” Jack blinked a few times, taken off guard, but he put two fingers under his chin, thoughtfully.

“The Prefect said they wanted to do some sport so I helped them.” He answered with no inquiry, his tail coming to a stop as he thought about the prefect. They had mentioned a few days back that they missed working out like they used to back in their world while batting their

lashes at him in hopes that their puppy eyes would send the message they desperately wanted him to get. Seeing that he didn't, they directly asked him to help them with their training, which managed to surprise him at first, although he quickly switched to the smirk the NRC students, oh so, liked to sport whenever they prepare themselves for their mischievous plans, replying back something along the lines of “You won't regret.” Which they, in fact, did, and if someone were to listen closely the sound of their cries as their body still aches could be vaguely heard. And he took pride in it as he started to rant to Leona, who couldn't care less, about the exercise he made them do. “And then we switched to d—”

He was cut off as his dorm head sighed, a long drawled one that made the boy trail off with disappointment. Who would have thought that the one he admired so much would just be this uncaring and lazy, something he never expected of him although he still had a large admiration left for him, which is why he called out to Leona when he walked past him to go who knew where. “A-Ah, Housewarden, where are you heading?” The lion stopped for a second, thinking that he could at least answer his question.

“Botanical garden.” And he immediately felt the disapproving gaze that burnt the back of his head almost menacingly, but he was used to the heat and a puppy would never be able to make his back drip with cold sweat.

What was unexpected though, was the fact that the boy kept the look on his eyes even as he strolled next to Leona inside the greenhouse, teasing the vein that was threatening to pop on his forehead. He never expected Jack to follow him inside even after he left him like a mopping dog on the path, but he had decided to, trying to bore a hole inside his head with sheer will and thoughts alone, inching closer each passing minutes until he ended up next to his dorm head, still continuing his staring. Which eventually prompted Leona to stop dead in his tracks, rubbing his forehead painfully as he felt the headache overtaking his thoughts. How was he supposed to continue his searches in this situation? So he looked up to lock eyes with his underclassman. “Is there a problem?”

Jack huffed, outraged by the question which made Leona dread the upcoming conversation, the headache only growing. “Are you lazing off again?” The lion's ear twitched, the tell tale signs that things were piling up too much for his own liking. But they all went right above Jack's head who continued to look at his senior with indignation. “I thought Ruggie senpai would have stopped you.” And the nagging continued during the entire walk around the botanical garden, which was quite the walk as Leona made sure to walk slower than his own usual pace to make sure that no spots were missed. There was only one place left to check, and while the prince had done his best to shake Jack off his back by boring him with the walk, it had no effect, so without wasting a second he stepped behind his designated bush, disappearing behind it as he crouched down to check underneath the leaves. But to Jack who was on the other side, it only looked to him that Leona had laid down to take a nap as he usually would.

Vexed by the attitude of his dorm head, he prepared himself to nag him once more, this time more firmly, but suddenly someone moved to stand next to him, and his tail and ears following on another as they pointed to the sky with the surprise that rippled through his body. The Hyena leaned over the plant to talk to Leona. “It's not in your bedroom.” Jack looked confused as he looked at Ruggie curiously before turning to the one still hidden from his view who audibly groaned with annoyance. He got up, stretching his back immediately after as he faced the other two.

“Nothing here either.” He raised his arms above his head, pulling on them to stretch the muscles around his shoulders and chest area. So it wasn't in his bedroom nor in the garden... Where else could he have gone to have possibly lost it?

While mulling over it, the hyena took the chance to pipe in, adding more to the current situation. “Also checked that one spot you like to hide in, ya know the one in the forest? There's nothing. Not even in the classrooms you usually nap in.” Leona's face scrunched up as Ruggie mentioned the list of the places he had checked. On one hand, it meant

that he knew 90% of the places he liked to hide at whenever he wanted to skip his classes which meant that he had to find new ones. Still on the same hand, the Hyena might be somehow considered his right hand man, but he was putting way too much effort into helping him which was something he was not used to coming from anyone. People had never gone out of their way to help him, preferring to fuss over the well-being of those whose social status rose well above his. And finally on the other hand... It wasn't unwelcome.

But this small tingling feeling he felt, sparkling within his heart, was quickly put aside. If put on a scale, the fact that his underclassman knew about his hiding spots was almost as alarming as the fact that he had lost Cheka's gift. “I didn't even go to any of those places, you wasted your time.” So he tried his best to keep Ruggie in check by deterring him from visiting any of those places in the future.

Although his effortless trick fell flat on its face, the hyena did not double down much to his chagrin, not that he held much expectation to begin with. “Hey, better be safe than sorry!” The answer only made Leona let out a deep rumble from the back of his throat, not agreeing with the answer but willing to at least make the effort to acknowledge it.

But the situation was still lost on Jack, who kept himself behind to listen to their conversation in hopes of grasping what was going on. And as nothing was truly developed for him to understand — They were searching for something? Is that why Leona decided to go to the botanical garden? Did he misinterpret his intentions?— he decided to speak up.“What's happening?”

Ruggie jumped as if he had only seen him now. Which wasn't all that wrong as he had only briefly recognised the wolf before forgetting about him completely. “Oh, Leona lost Cheka’s gift.” And said man closed his eyes in anticipation when he saw Jack's head snapping towards him once again. Great, now he had to listen to the boy rambling about losing gifts and the lack of consideration he had for others, and—

“Is that why you came here? I would've helped you if I had known!” Let him repeat himself but, Great! Now Jack was acting like a kicked puppy, sad that all he had done was judge Leona the entire time instead of clearly communicating and asking what he was doing here. And Ruggie struggled not to laugh, the scene all too funny for him, with the wolf, ears downward, tears in his eyes and cheeks flushed with shame, staring at the lion who had turned to an empty shell, looking at an empty spot far away, all in hopes of getting his forgiveness.

Eventually, when he felt like he could no longer keep his laughter in, he patted Jack's back to try and change the subject, not for them, but for his own well-being because Leona would certainly take revenge on him for days if he were to break down right now. “A— A-Any-way!” He tried not to fail now, coughing in his hand to regain a semblance of composure while the other two switched their attention to him, who was having a hard time stopping the wheezing. “W-We've already looked up most places, not like we needed too many people to help us. And the night's coming so we'll stop, right, Leona?” The Prince puffed out, not wanting to enter Ruggie's game but knowing he had to do so to avoid Jack's guilty stares.

“...” Ruggie looked at the Savanaclaw's dorm leader, insisting with eyes alone that he should answer faster or else they would stay the entire night to try and comfort the youngest boy. Because, much to the inconvenience of the one who lost his nephew's gift, the sun was already starting to set, the day coming to a close faster than he would have liked. “Yes. We're stopping.”

The hyena turned back to Jack, his mood brighter now that Leona was playing along. “See?! So instead let's go back to the dorm!” And without waiting for an answer, he turned to exit, walking towards it with a skip in his steps at the thought of having a well-deserved dinner. Not longer after, Jack followed suit, not before giving one last apologetic look to Leona, and the man could only stare as the wolf seemingly tried to cheer himself up, as if the fact that his dorm leader wasn't lazing off was the

proof he needed to bring back the passion and admiration he felt towards him.

But for the man, and unlike the other two, the day was a failure for the prince. He still hadn't find it, what Cheka had gifted him just the day before, and his ego definitely took a hit as he had managed to lose it not even a day after he had received it. And he didn't how to confront his nephew if he were to ask him about him after he had looked so eager, trying hard to convince Leona that he should bring it with him the next time he came to the castle for his vacation. Not that he had accepted the promise, managing to switch the kid's attention to something else, but he knew that he would surely be disappointed in him, and the idea somehow made him uncomfortable.

So with lazy feet, he followed suit, strolling behind them until they parted ways when they arrived at their dorm. Jack made sure to wave goodbye, with a more pointed motion aimed at his dorm leader, and Ruggie only told his farewell, as nonchalantly as always, before going his own way, leaving the last one of the trio to head towards his own room to rest. Opening the to his bedroom, he mentally wrote down on a fleeting note that the hyena he kept around had cleaned the room from ceiling to floor, before heading towards his bed where he fell face first, taking a deep breath of the perfume of the fabric softener Ruggie used for his new blankets. Turning on his back so he could more comfortably kick his sandals off to the side, the momentary struggle made him cursed under his breath, already annoyed by his day, then this! Once he had successfully removed them, his shirt following suit, he eventually settled down, taking a deep breath as he melted in the blankets, finally closing his eyes with no intention of opening them until the sun peeked its nose and woke him for a new day.

The next morning, a, surprisingly, familiar weight laid on his face, making his breathing hard and shallow, waking him up as its way to wish him its greatest morning. His hands jumped to the object to pull it off, but it was to no avail as it refused to budge, tightening its grip around his head. Confused, although the brief idea of what was happening crossed his mind before being discarded as he deemed it impossible, he straightened his back as he sat up, still pulling on whatever stuck itself to his face. Although after a bit of struggle, prying the claws off the back of his head proved to do quite the wonder, it eventually fell on top of his stomach before bouncing lower towards his knees, the pain didn't fail to make him double over, a grunt taken out of him.

Anger flashed across his face as he rose his head, bangs falling before his face creating a shadow that made him more intimidating than usual. And as he was about to explode, the world ready to witness one of the very rare times the second Prince was truly wrathful—

“Unca!”

Tiny arms were waved up and down, happily greeting him. “What are you doing here?” Seeing the furball excitedly wriggling on his legs to find the right way to rest was not what he wanted to see first thing in the morning, and the headache from the day before came crashing down on him like a truck ready to send him in a new dimension for him to save.

At the question, the small lion let his head fall to the side with an inquisitive look that made his eyes sparkle. “Hmmmm... What I am doing here?” He repeated the question as if confused, which would have made Leona facepalm if he didn't think that such action was ridiculous. Not before long, Cheka perked up, remembering what he had come for. “Unca, I accidentally went home with it!” He immediately pushed his hands in the pocket of his small bermuda shorts, struggling to pick whatever was inside, although it left some time for said “unca” to replace the hair that were messing with his sight. His victory cry suddenly resonated in the room, and he thrusted his discovery in Leona's face who begrudgingly took a look at it

Only for him to be baffled when he saw the keychain dangling between his fingers.

“Papa had a party yesterday so I came today!” Without waiting for his uncle, he grabbed his much bigger hands, putting the small object in his palms before closing his fingers. He didn't fail to pat his closed fists with a proud look. “Now Unca, say bye bye to bad luck!” And the second prince could only stare at the youngest royal with disbelief, the sudden realization that he had spent his entire day worrying about it, something so out of character coming from him. Ah, to think that he had run up and down to avoid his nephew from crying until all water left his body, when he was actually the one who had mistakenly grabbed it when he went back home. It most probably happened when the little kid tried to grab his shirt to get his uncle to slow down as he had started to fall asleep, feet dragging on the floor as he rubbed his eyes tiredly. Yes, that definitely was it.

Which made him feel even more stupid. And as his nephew continued to wriggle, happy to be near his dearest uncle, Leona could only wonder, damn, he was truly weak when it came to the little lion beaming with sheer happiness...

CACTUS BEST PRACTICE

By Lina

Jack walked into the botanical garden, his nose twitching with the abundance of smells that hit him as soon as he opened the door.

When he was younger, his sensitive nose would often overwhelm him, but as he grew older, he learned how to ignore most of the smells.
The botanical garden, however, was not a place where he could do that.

He wandered deeper into the garden on the quaint stone path, unsure exactly what he was looking for.
“Alright, buddy, let’s see if we can find you... something,” he mumbled to the small potted cactus in his hand.

Some shuffling and a soft thud made Jack’s ear twitch. Curious as to who was nearby, he listened for a little longer before trying to peek through the foliage. His view was too obscured, however, and he was only able to see the bottom of someone’s lab coat.
Quietly, he moved forward to peek around the bend in the path.

Immediately recognizing whose figure was in front of him, Jack bristled.

Geeze, not this guy.
Jack paused, deciding what he wanted to do.
Just as he started turning around, he heard his name, making him freeze

and stiffen his shoulders.

"Hello, Jack."

Dangit.

Jack faced forward again and noticed a pair of mismatched eyes peering at him through the gaps in between the plants.

Resigned, he continued around the corner and was faced with Jade, crouched in front of some bushes.
"Hey." He greeted back gruffly.
"I didn't expect to see anyone else here." Jade said as he stood and dusted himself off.
"Yeah, well. Garden's a public space, so..." His ears twitched downward as he mumbled quietly, not really sure how to reply.
"Indeed," Jade smiled. "If I'm to take a guess, you're here to search for your housewarden?"
"Er, no, not this–"
"–Oh, what have you there?" Jade interrupted Jack and glanced pointedly at the small pot in the other's hands.
"It's my cactus."

Jade approached Jack with an excited gleam in his eyes.
"It's a rather small and cute one. Hardly something one would think to see you with," Jade said with a grin. "Ah, but it is rather prickly- perhaps it's suited to you after all," He chuckled.
"You know, that really doesn't sound like a compliment," Jack stated.
In response, Jade simply smiled and tilted his head innocently.

With a sigh, Jack rubbed the back of his head and gazed at the glass dome above him.
"Yeah, well, it's what brings me here. Since you asked."

His ears flicked back momentarily.
"Oh?"

At Jade's prodding, Jack paused.

It's always best to say less than more to him...

He knew very well that information fueled the guys of Octavinelle, Jade in particular. Anything said would be taken, noted, and stored in an unbelievably vast memory vault–if not a physical one–to be used against someone at any given time in the future.

Still, he couldn't see the harm in sharing this.
Jack had a feeling Jade wouldn't let him go without telling, too.

"Yeah. The little guy's not doing too hot. I know how to care for it. It gets plenty of sun and not too much water, but it isn't growing much or flowering. I thought bringing it here would help me figure out why. I mean, we got lotsa plants here. There's gotta be something to help me find a clue."

Jade nodded as he listened.

Jack continued, "Plus I figured if the caretaker was here maybe they could help, but–"
"–May I see it?" Jade asked, placing his hand on his chest.
"Huh?"
"I am not especially familiar with cacti, but perhaps I could be of some assistance."

Jack stared at Jade dubiously for a moment.

It's not as if he expected him to throw it on the ground or anything; that didn't seem his style–his brother, though... perhaps.
But seeing how upset Jade had gotten about that log with spores before, not counting his fake tears, Jack figured his plant would remain unscathed in Jade's hands.
Plus, if there was a chance he could actually help the little guy...

One of his ears swiveled back with caution before handing his plant over.

Jade examined the cactus thoroughly, even taking his gloves off to check the moisture content of the soil and gently running his finger on the creases of it, being careful to avoid the needles.
Meanwhile, Jack watched anxiously as Jade continued turning pot to inspect it, occasionally murmuring things to himself.

"Ah, I see." Jade finally spoke.
Jack released a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding.
"I think perhaps I've got it," Jade told him, making Jack's ears perk up; and he handed the cactus back over. "Please wait here for a moment."

Jade slipped his glove back on and made his way a little further down the path, leaving Jack alone for a minute. Jack glanced at the small, sick plant that he held; the excitement of possibly helping it made his tail wag a little. Not that he would ever admit that.

He had quietly urged his tail to calm down just as Jade arrived again.

"Here we are," Jade said cheerfully as he held up a bag of... dirt?

Fertilizer?
Jack tilted his head."Uh. What is it?"
"Soil," Jade set it back down with a quiet thump, "I suspect the one you are using doesn't have enough nutrients, or is perhaps just the wrong type."
"What makes you think that?"
"Based on the information you gave me, as well as these brown lines in the creases–"

Jack lifted the cactus to his face and saw what Jade was talking about.

Huh. Hadn't noticed that.

"–As well as the discoloration and wrinkling around the base."

He took a peek at the base as well. He had noticed that, but hadn't thought much of it and had assumed cacti just looked like that sometimes.

"I see," He mumbled with a flush, slightly embarrassed he hadn't noticed nearly as much as Jade.
"Indeed. Now, let's get it repotted, shall we?" Jade placed his hands on his hips confidently.

Those words made Jack lower the pot again as he shot Jade a skeptical look.

"Hold on," he told him.
"Is something the matter?" Jade questioned, looking surprised.
"You're obviously not going to just help. You're too shady for that."
"Your words wound me." He brought his hand to his chin and pouted.

Jack, unconvinced, raised an eyebrow.

"You've always got an angle and need something in return."
Jade, seemingly miraculously, got over his 'hurt feelings' and smiled.
"Yes, it's true I believe it's fair to receive something in return for something else–"
"–Okay so. What d'you want?"
"However," Jade continued, "Today I'm just glad to speak with a fellow plant lover." He beamed.

Filled with doubt, Jack looked from Jade down to his cactus before warily nodding.

Whatever that guy was gaining from this situation was a mystery to Jack, but he agreed regardless– if only to help his little cactus out.

The two moved to one of the work tables nearby and set to work.
Jack had offered to carry the soil for Jade as a show of gratitude, and opened it as soon as he set it down.

He then stood on standby–ready to assist if needed–and watched, intrigued, as Jade carefully scooped dirt from the pot. He paid extra care, Jack noticed, to avoid breaking any pins off the cactus as he lifted it from its home. Jade peered into the pot and crinkled his eyebrows slightly.

"Jack, could you please grab me some of those gravel rocks from over there?" Jade asked, nodding his head toward a nearby set of planter boxes.
"Huh? Yeah, 'course."

Jack walked where Jade had gestured and scooped up a big handful of rocks, which he brought over and released onto the table. The stones clacked pleasantly as they hit the table, some sliding off the pile and skittering toward the edge.
"Thank you."

He proceeded to scoop a few into the bottom of the pot.

"My earlier hypothesis was incorrect," he started, "At least, partially."
"Huh. Didn't think you'd admit to being wrong." Jack grinned. "Erk, sorry." He tacked on, noticing Jade had looked up at him.
"Yes, it does happen from time to time." Jade grinned.
Jack let out a silent breath, relieved Jade had taken his comment well.

"So, uh. What's that mean?"
Jade scooped some more soil into the pot with a few more stones as he spoke, "The soil was the issue, but not because you used the incorrect one. I'm sure it was plenty suitable, actually. Your cactus simply needed a more rocky soil to thrive."
"...Ah."
"Yes, I believe there wasn't proper drainage for the poor thing."
"Can't believe it was something as little as that. I did throw some rocks in there after researching how to take care of cacti, but... darn."
"I did notice that. You just didn't add enough of them, it seems."

Jade finished replanting the cactus and stood up straight, dusting off his hands.
"I do have to say, Jack, you did a remarkable job, otherwise. It really shows you looked into caring for it."
"Oh. Thanks." Jack rubbed the back of his head and looked away. "I did."
Jade smiled before picking the pot off the table and handing it back to Jack.
"That should do it. Your cactus should be looking better within a couple of days, I think."

"Thank you. For doing that." Jack said quietly.
"Of course. I know all too well how baffling it is to see something isn't going right. However, I do enjoy figuring out what the issue is." He grinned, "Plants are often fickle, and never fail to surprise you in some

way."
"Yeah, well, guess I lucked out running into you, then." Jack smiled while looking down at his newly replanted cactus.
"Indeed. If you need help again, do come and see me." Jade grinned again, though this time with a certain glint in his eye.
"I think I'll be okay." Jack replied hurriedly, taking a step back.
Jade simply beamed, "Well, please do keep it in mind."

Jack's ears swiveled back as he looked at Jade.

"And you're sure you don't want anything?" His look was skeptical.
"Positive."
"Well, at least let me clean the area up as thanks. I'd hate to not do anything in return."

Jade paused.

"I'm more than happy to tidy up myself, but you're more than welcome to, if that's what you wish."

"Yeah. Please!" Jack responded energetically, "Leave it to me!"
"Very well then. Have at it. I'm afraid I must get going now, anyway."
"Yeah, go ahead. And thanks again." Jack set the cactus on the table so he could begin cleanup.

"It was my pleasure." Jade replied, nodding his head once before walking away and leaving Jack to his task.

Jack immediately set to work, all the while listening to Jade's footsteps continuously getting quieter.

The first thing he did was use both hands to scoop all the remaining gravel into a pile–he had brought over way more than Jade needed–then stared at it. He sat down on the stool with a sigh, resting his chin on his hand and glancing at his cactus once more.
"Who woulda thought the answer was that easy? Sorry little guy. I thought I had added enough at first."
He picked up one of the rocks and turned it around a few times.
"Well. No use moping over it."

The stool scraped on the ground as he stood up, and he scooped all the stones in his hands to bring them back where he had found them.
After dropping them, he made his way back over and picked up the bag of soil, which had barely been used. Jack closed it, not wanting it to dry up, and put it back where he suspected Jade had gotten it from.
Not that it mattered anyway, he thought. The supply stations scattered around the garden all had a variety of things, so it's not like it really belonged in a certain place.

The last thing he did was clean off the table, the dust bothering his nose slightly and making him sneeze.

When all was said and done, Jack picked up the plant once more and began to leave the garden, slightly excited to see the progress his plant would be making in the days to come.
Maybe, just maybe, he hoped, it would finally flower.

Hungry

THE SANDS AND THE RAIN

By Soru, Art by Mah (midnightmah07)

Occasionally, Kalim enjoyed sitting by himself in the library. Not that he really studied, or anything, but he just liked being there. It wasn't often that he went there, but today, there was a specific reason. If he remembered what day it is today, he'd be here too. Kalim thought to himself, before a fluff ball of ginger hair appeared in his view.

"Oh, Kalim-senpai! What're you doing here?" Ace asked with a look that said you're not the studious type, what are you doing in the library?, and despite the look being offending, Kalim didn't have the heart to tell him off. But he won't do well when he stands next to you or him, the voice in his head said, and Kalim found it hard to disagree.

"I'm waiting for Leona! We meet up here every once in a while, since he likes that the library is quiet."

"Huh?! Why would you want to meet up with Leona-senpai?! He's mean and a grouch to boot."

"Well." Kalim smiles, and he gestures for Ace to bring the rest of his little group, for he never moves on campus without them, and when they all sit, he starts. "It's a long story, one that started when I was maybe four or five."

—

Kalim al-Asim, 4 y/o. Leona Kingscholar, 7 y/o.

"We will be receiving the Kingscholars of the Sunset Savannah tonight." Kalim's mother starts, brushing his hair from his forehead gently and waving the servants away, who comply silently. Kalim doesn't hear them leave, but he doesn't care. His mother is here, who is not well because of the baby in her belly. His brother or sister is troubling her, he thinks with all the fury of a four year old, but it vanishes when she places a gentle kiss on his forehead. "The Crown Prince is 17, but it is important you know him. It is important he knows you."

Even his mother makes no mention of the scarred seven year old boy who stands apart from his family, and Kalim feels like talking to the tall, burly lion beastman with orange-and-blond hair is unnecessary, not when there exists someone more interesting. Someone more dangerous- as the servants say. Leona Kingscholar is the type of man you have to beat in submission, like the finest diamond must be tortured to be shaped. Kalim doesn't care about all that, because Jamil is dangerous too, and he trusts him with his life. Even more than that, really.

"Hi! I'm Kalim!" He starts, running up to Leona. Already the boy is taller than he is, but unlike the fakeness radiating off of his older brother, Kalim only feels honest disinterest radiating off the boy. He doesn't comment on the bandages on his eye, because that's not his business, really, and after a short and clipped name exchange, he leads Leona all over the house as the adults coo about a new relationship to be formed.

But even if Leona's words are harsh and clipped like he has seen the world and he hates it, his hands are warm and soft, and Kalim can't help but feel like a baby bird nestled by something safe and sound. He knows this warmth will be stolen away soon, like how Jamil went from kind and bubbly to quiet. Is it wrong of him to say that he wants to protect this forever?

—

Kalim al-Asim, 11 y/o. Leona Kingscholar, 14 y/o.

Every night, before Kalim goes to sleep, he has the habit of praying. He prays, even though he's not sure there even is a god out there who's keeping an eye on him. He has not seen his mother in four years, for she stays hidden in the Queen's palace (though they are not royalty, they are descendants of royalty, and so, she is a queen), tending to whatever it is she does. The children she bore after him weakened her so much that she refused all her children, and since then, Kalim has had no mother.

But beyond his mother, he prays for his siblings, who are little, and prone to mischief. That the light in their eyes does not fade before it really has to, like it happened with him and Jamil. He prays for his father's other wives, currently pregnant with their 3rd, 4th, or 5th child, that their wombs give them no trouble, and that their child is healthy and safe.

He prays for the enigma that is the second prince of the Sunset Savannah, Leona Kingscholar. He doesn't really remember him, even though there are photographs to prove that they were once thick as thieves, but then again, who remembers what happened when they were four years old? But try as he might, Kalim could not forget the anger, the sorrow, the grief, and the tiredness of his green eyes, and because he is not yet the head of the family, he can only pray.

But in the end, prayers are useless, for the next time Leona is seen in the newspapers, it is him at his brother's coronation, standing next to a taller, more muscular, but kinder-looking lion beastwoman. Her hair is a beautiful shade of light brown, and the way she looks at Crown Prince-no, Heir to the Savannah Throne (king in almost every way but one, for his father has not yet passed) Farena Kingscholar makes him want to throw up. When was the last time his mother had looked at his father like this?

When the Kingscholars arrive at their door again, it is only Leona who arrives. Braided hair in the way that signifies that he is almost an adult, he walks in a manner that is silent and gentle, but also in a manner that commands attention. Jamil doesn't bother giving Leona the time of day, and prefers to focus on his own duties. Except, he does tell Kalim to not speak too much, for the Prince knows how to get the truth out of people without even trying.

"Kalim." he says by way of greeting. "The Sunset Savannah sends their wishes."

"Thank you." is all Kalim says. There is no point in talking excessively in a pit of snakes, and they are both old enough to know that. But Kalim leads Leona by the hand, which is now calloused and scarred with the anguish of life, and somewhere deep in his heart, there forms a crack.

—

Kalim al-Asim, 14 y/o. Leona Kingscholar, 17 y/o.

"It is the First Prince's second birthday," Jamil reads out from the agenda for the day, as the morning sun of the Sunset Savannah shines brightly through the balcony doors. "We are expected to be there within 45 minutes, after which the Prince will be presented to the public formally, and then a luncheon, after which guests are free to roam the palace halls."

"Will Leona be attending?" Kalim asks as Jamil rolls his eyes. "What? He is part of the royal family, no? This is his nephew."

"Rumours say that he will not be attending, because he is currently in his first year in Night Raven College. Plus, he was there for his first birthday last year. The kid's not even going to remember this."

"I guess not." Kalim murmurs, as he looks outside. "But Cheka is attached to Leona."

"Use the honorifics, please." is all Jamil says.

Later in the day, during the luncheon, Kalim finds a familiar flurry of brown hair, braided in a manner so unique to the man himself. “Leona?” He mutters to himself as he gets up and chases him, and he finds the beastman cradling Cheka, who was currently sniffling in his uncle’s chest, staining the yellow uniform belonging to Night Raven with tears and snot. “Enough, you brat.”

Despite the cold tone, Cheka gurgles and looks up at his uncle, reaching out for a hug. “Hug me!” he says, and Leona groans but accepts the hug, putting his nephew down on the floor. “I miss you!” Leona sighs a low and long sigh, but whispers the same back to him.

“Will you stay here?” Cheka asks. “No, I can’t. I have to go back.” is the response he gets, and it’s obvious the little prince doesn’t like that, for he immediately starts throwing a tantrum, screeching and screaming so loudly the guards almost make their way towards this corridor. “Cheka, listen to me.” The little boy’s attention is grabbed, and he quiets, fisting Leona’s pants in his small hand.

“I need to go. But I will come back. You are the prince. Today is your birthday. Go have fun.” A sniffle, and then another. “I miss you.”

“I know.”

Kalim doesn’t say a word, but he thinks Leona would be a pretty good father.

—

Kalim al-Asim, 16 y/o. Leona Kingscholar, 19 y/o.

“It’s so cool that I get to be in the same dorm as you, Jamil!” Kalim exclaims, but all Jamil does is roll his eyes and mutter something he can’t quite catch. Kalim chooses to ignore it before continuing on. There are some things only time can take care of. “Anyway, I’m not all that smart, but I’m hoping I’ll get smarter surrounded by so many people!”

“That’s not how it happens and you know it.” Kalim hears a deep voice behind him speak, and lo and behold, the unca himself. Leona Kingscholar, infamous for his horrid media presence, dressed in the housewarden’s clothes of the Savanaclaw dorm, done with his classes for the day. “Absolute dumbass. Did your housewarden not tell you anything?”

Jamil bows low as Leona’s lip curls with a harsh sneer, and Kalim decides to interject. “It’s my first day exploring the campus, so I just thought about it haha! It’s nice to see you again after two years!” He sees Leona’s tail swish quickly behind him, and Jamil takes a step back.

“You mean at Cheka’s second birthday.” Oh no, not a question.

“Yeah! I barely saw you for a few minutes there, but I knew you’d turn up!” “Haven’t gone back since, though. Just a bit here and there.”

“Doesn’t make you a bad uncle!” Despite not knowing how to deal with all types of people, Kalim thinks this is exactly what Leona wants to hear. “Doesn’t make you a bad person, either. Just means you’re swamped with work, or you’re tired! So just rest well, and try to finish your work on time, and you’ll be okay.”

Leona doesn’t say anything, but nods and walks off, and Kalim smiles, always happy to help. He also ignores any of Jamil’s admonishments.

—

Kalim al-Asim, 17 y/o. Leona Kingscholar, 20 y/o.

“You don’t mind me being here, do you?” A tired voice floats through the desert air, and Kalim looks ahead to find Leona sitting near the oasis. “Even if you do mind, I could give less of shit.”

“I don’t mind at all.” Kalim’s voice is soft, gentle, because he doesn’t see the tired prince, he also sees the little prince who stood away from his father and brother because that was all he knew, and his heart breaks all

over again. “Anyone who needs respite here is welcome.”

“That attitude won’t take you far, especially with that snake you keep next to you.” Kalim frowns lightly as Leona laughs harshly and looks away. “What do you want?”

“To make sure you’re okay.” “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. We are-” Kalim pauses as he makes his way towards Leona’s side, and he doesn’t mention the little flinch and recoil. “We are people who will always be adored or hated. It’s our fate, but the best thing we can do is take care of each other, no? To be mindful is to also plan for the future, and I would like you in my future. As my friend and ally, not as the Prince.”

Leona laughs hollowly at that, but doesn’t refuse Kalim. But when has he ever refused anyone or anything that was kind and true, something he knew had no other motive than to please him because he was close to them. “Fine. I’ll be in your life.”

“Thank you, friend.”

—

Kalim al-Asim, 17 y/o. Leona Kingscholar, 20 y/o.

“A surprise?” Leona asks, tail swishing slowly behind him. Kalim, on the other hand, isn’t as perturbed by the motion, extending a familiar (but now tattooed) hand towards the beastman.

“Where?”

“The oasis! Meet me there after classes, okay? And go to class!” Kalim exclaims as an answer as Jamil meets Leona’s eyes and bows his head a little with a lithe smile.

Later in the day, during the break between Potionology and Magic History, when the artificial sun angles itself in just the right way, Kalim lets the water flow, and when his friend arrives, there is a rainbow waiting just for him. “You shouldn’t have,” Leona mutters, before rolling his eyes fondly.

“Really, you shouldn’t have. The blot is gonna stick to you for a while now.”

“That’s alright! I just wanted to see you smile!”

And for the first time in a long time, Leona Kingscholar lets go.

@yaamatic

@yaamatic

SLUMBER PARTY -RUGGIE

By Ren (bunnwich)

Another strange dream had kept Yuu from sleeping. Without much thought, they decided to sneak into the cafeteria after hours—this time without Grim, who had unceremoniously passed out after dinner. Before heading back to their beloved chilly and rickety Ramshackle, Yuu decided to make one last late-night stop.

They had always liked Ruggie Bucchi. Yuu couldn't remember much about their past before Night Raven College, but despite the boy's mischievous, opportunistic nature, they felt a kindred spirit in him—someone who did what they needed to do to survive.

Something Yuu had done ever since they arrived in this strange place.

Plus, the hyena could stand to gain a few pounds...

Yuu knocked lightly on the door, standing in the drafty stairwell of the Savanaclaw dorm, clutching the brown paper bag behind their back with one hand.

After a few minutes, the skinny boy opened the door, stumbling a bit. "Oi, it's late—whaddya want?" His voice was heavy with sleep as he lifted the yellow sleeping mask from his eyes, rubbing one with a fist.

He seemed to have been expecting someone else. Yuu had never seen him in his nightclothes before. They were oversized, hanging off his slim frame like his dorm uniform—probably more of Leona's hand-me-downs. He wore a standard brown Savanaclaw shirt that was too big, causing it to fall off one shoulder. Around his waist sagged a pair of yellow gym shorts, the color reminded Yuu of dandelions.

Yuu tapped their chin, thinking of what to say.

> "I'm here to see you!"

> "The water stopped working in Ramshackle again."

"Eh?" Ruggie straightened, blinking the sleep from his large icy blue eyes before they widened in surprise. He looked away suddenly, scratching at his dirty blonde hair. "Hey, uh..." he stammered, glancing around the hall. "Keep it down, will ya? Don't wanna wake his majesty." He scoffed, stepping aside to let Yuu in, his sandy brown ears flicking in annoyance.

He softly closed the door behind Yuu and flipped on a dim lantern by his bed, his roommate snoring away carelessly.

Yuu hadn't expected to be let inside, but they walked in anyway, keeping the bag behind their back, careful not to rustle it too much.

Too late—it seemed Ruggie was already behind them, poking at the bag, making them jump.

"What's that?" His ears perked up.

How had he moved so fast? Yuu didn't want to assume, but could he smell it?

> "Nothing! It's mine!"

> "Just a thank you."

There was no use hiding it. Yuu laughed softly and brought the bag to the front, lifting it toward Ruggie. "I just wanted to say thanks... for

showing me how to rewire a light, fix the leak under the sink, and—" Yuu shook their head, realizing they'd be here all night if they listed everything Ruggie had helped with.

With all the odd jobs he'd done, Ruggie was a treasure trove of practical knowledge—knowledge Ramshackle desperately needed just to function at minimal capacity.

At first, Yuu had bribed him with food or cooked for him at Ramshackle, but eventually, Ruggie had started coming over randomly without them even prompting. "Anyway," Yuu restarted, "I... know these are your favorite."

Ruggie snatched the bag and skittered over to his bed, which was—surprisingly—made. Maybe he couldn't sleep either.

He sat down with a squeak, the soft glow of the light painting his skin a warm golden hue. The bag crunched as he opened it, and his usual toothy grin spread across his face. He laughed into his hand and grabbed a treat, taking a huge bite with a satisfied little sound. After wiping his mouth, he set the bag beside him and tilted his head up at Yuu. "Okay, whaddya want? Your toilet break again, Yuu?"

> "To be friends!"

> "Nothing, it's a gift!"

"Ha! So..." He grabbed a large white pillow from the head of the bed, hugging it to his chest. "You're telling me you actually want... nothing in return?" He considered this for a moment before snickering, hugging the pillow tighter. "You're so weird." One of his ears flicked as his eyes shifted around the room, then flashed another mischievous grin.

Though Yuu wouldn't consider his friendship "nothing," they kept quiet, simply shrugging.

Ruggie cleared his throat. "Hey, uh... did you eat any of these yet, Yuu?

SLUMBER PARTY -JACK

By Ren (bunnwich)

Yuu was beyond frustrated with Grim *always* relying on them for History of Magic. He was the one born into this strange world of magic after all, not them. Even though their *cumulative* grades reflected on the entire Ramshackle dorm, they couldn't help but feel most of the weight of their academic failures. Grim was *their* responsibility, after all.

At the moment, the hot-headed cat was off causing trouble with another student while Mr. Trein handed back the graded tests. Yuu groaned as the stern man eyed them, slapping their paper face down on the desk.

When they flipped it over, a pang of familiarity settled in their chest, along with a creeping sense of dread. *Another D.* Had they attended a school like this before, wherever that might have been?

Yuu sighed heavily.

> "Did I ever take tests like this back in my homeland?"

> "Was I ever a good student?"

The bell rang, and everyone rushed from their seats, squeezing through the door with groans. It was somewhat comforting to know that *no one* had done well, but one last thought echoed in Yuu's mind as they watched the others chat away.

> "Did I have any friends back then?"

Being the last one out, Yuu gathered their things, stuffing the graded test between their textbooks. Sliding off the bench unceremoniously, they bent over to look between the crowd's feet, searching for their unruly cat.

> "Grim? Grim?"

> "He's gone!"

Sometimes Yuu wondered if Grim even took *any* of this seriously. Scoffing, they gave up and turned the corner, shaking their head in defeat.

"Oof!"

Yuu suddenly collided with something firm, yet warm and...bouncy? Their books and papers fluttered around them in a whirlwind, scattering around their shoes.

"Mmph!" Yuu exclaimed, their voice muffled against what was now clearly someone's broad chest.

No tie? And...ugh, something was tugging at their hair.

A familiar scent surrounded them—clean, simple, like pine trees and sweet mint gum. They tried to pull away, wincing as something tugged their hair harder. When they tilted their head upwards, they saw it—a necklace.

> "Ow! Ow!"

“Yuu?” came a deep, curt voice. “Easy! We seem to be—” The speaker stammered.

Before Yuu could fully process who it was, they were grabbed by the shoulders and gently moved closer to the wall, out of the way of all the foot traffic.
Yuu would recognize that voice anywhere.

If they hadn’t known Jack Howl so well, they might have thought he was irritated with them. But Yuu felt his large fingers carefully untangling his signature fang necklace from their hair, his heartbeat fluttery yet strong.

For a while Yuu was helplessly resting against his warm chest. But, after a few moments, Jack pushed them backward softly, now making himself fully visible.

“Jack!” Yuu exclaimed, scratching the back of their head in shame. “Thanks...” They glanced around, realizing they had completely lost track of Grim. “Stupid cat.” they muttered.

“Hmph.” Jack crossed his arms, his golden eyes narrowing as his snowy white ears flicked in attention. “Uh-” He bent down to pick up the scattered books and papers before Yuu could.

“Ugh.” Yuu cringed when Jack picked up their most *recent* test.

“Hmm,” Jack noted the grade, placing the test neatly on top of the stack before handing it back to Yuu.

“Tch. Did you *even* study?” he asked gruffly. “.I mean...did Grim study?”

“Hey, *I* did study!” Yuu poked their chest indignantly. “Grim..” They sighed, hugging the books to their chest. “Sometimes, I just don’t get it, you know> Especially the terminology... I don’t even remember much about my own home, so it’s hard to take in the history of so many other places.”

Jack’s ears dipped as his face fell into a frown. “I get it. You don’t have a....home-field advantage.”

Yuu laughed softly, leave it to Jack Howl to compare everything to sports somehow. “Yeah, you could say that.” They looked up at him, tears unexpectedly welling up. Lately, they’d been feeling *off*, and the failed test wasn’t helping.

Jack’s ears perked up again, noticing them quickly wipe their cheek against their sleeve. “Yuu,” he said seriously, “Listen, why don’t you....come to my room tonight at 7:30. Bring Grim! The next test—you’ll get an A+.”

“Really?” Yuu grinned, blinking away their tears. Jack had *always* been there for them, even during Night Raven College’s toughest moments. It was hard not to admire his tenacity and dedication.They weren’t sure if they were capable of such noble actions all the time.

> **"Okay!”**

No surprise, Grim fell asleep before it was time to meet up at Savanaclaw with Jack, but Yuu wasn’t going to give up that easily.

Jack might not have been the most eloquent person, but something about him drew Yuu in. His stoic and even-keel presence was sort of comforting and reliable. He was a good ally—and a good friend. Would Jack use that word too?

After a few knocks, the boy opened the door with a crooked smile, the same exuberance beaming from earlier.

He wore a loose tank top with his signature Savanaclaw yellow and a pair of red runners shorts, adorned with tiny succulents.

Yuu couldn't help but smile, letting their eyes drift behind the boy's huge fluffy white-gray tail to the shelf of his carefully pruned plants. They knew Jack tended to them religiously.

They took in a long inhale then and a deep exhale, their cheeks flaring up even more. Something in their chest squeezed. "Hey, sorry I'm late! Grim...*well*—he fell asleep already."

The boy moved aside to let them in and they stepped inside, walking over to Jack's side of the dorm room.

> I'm ready to learn, teacher, sir!"

> "Let's do this!"

They chirped facetiously, trying to forget about how mad they were with their cat.

"Awe, don't call me that." Jack grumbled, flipping the towel on his neck over his desk chair. "I'm not anything special, I just—" He yawned, clearly a bit *bushed*. "Sorry, I...just finished my evening workout."

Yuu glanced at the clock; it wasn't even *that* late, only around eight, but Jack looked *ready* for bed.

"Where are your sleep clothes, Yuu?"

> "My...huh?!"

> "Was I supposed to bring them?"

Did he think they were staying the night or something?

He grunted in response to their confusion. “If we’re gonna be ready for the next test on Monday we’re going to have to study *all* night tonight... maybe tomorrow night too!” He furrowed his sharp brows and smirked over at Yuu, seeming unaware of the implications.

“T-the whole weekend?” Yuu blinked, a wry chuckle leaving their agape lips.

“Well, you want an A, don’t ya?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Though...I guess I shouldn’t have assumed. That one was on me.” He frowned, his ears drooping along with his head. “You...don’t have to stay if you don’t wanna...”

> “But, I do want to.”

> ”Maybe I should go...”

They kicked off their shoes and sat on Jack’s bed, determined. “Listen, I’m committed! Let’s do this.Let’s...get into it!””

Jack’s tail wagged, his smile widening. “Now that’s what I like to hear! Uh-” He quickly tapered off. “I-I mean... good. I can loan you a shirt for sleeping if you need one.” In a few quick motions he walked over to his dresser, pulling out the biggest gray T-shirt Yuu had ever seen.

They chuckled at the design— a smiling cartoon pine tree.

“Just a shirt?” Yuu muttered to themselves, though...it would do. They knew it would reach their knees easily. “O-okay!” Yuu could tell he was excited anyway, his tail wagging was always a dead giveaway.

”Great!” The boy piped up before yawning again. He came back to the bed, handing over the shirt. Once he sat down, he leaned into Yuu. “What first?”

They were a bit flustered at the sudden undivided attention, his gaze was so...focused on their face, and he looked to them expectantly, raring to go with whatever they said.

It was sorta...*cute*.

“Well...” Yuu flipped through the pages of the textbook, before closing the book with another idea in mind instead.

> “What if... you tell me more about your home Jack? I wanna know more about...you.”

“M-me?” His eyes widened and he stared at them for a few seconds. “W-well uh-” He began his voice wavering. “That’s not really what we’re here for-”

Yuu smirked and propped their face on their hand. They leaned in, closing some space between them and peering up into his honey-colored eyes. “Aw, please?” They asked coily. “Technically, it’s *still* history that I don’t know...”

He sputtered a bit more, his usually rough demeanor melting away, and his fangs visible as he seemed unable to close his mouth. “Er...okay.” He obeyed, *helplessly* it seemed.

Yuu knew they were teasing him a bit, but still, they were surprised at how *easily* he seemed to roll over on his original plan.

So, for a while, Yuu listened to Jack talk about himself, awkwardly at first but then they could see his hesitance fade away as he told them more

about where he was born. Things about his parents, his homeland, and even his younger siblings. It seemed he was especially fond of his younger sister, who always tried to compete with him despite only being seven.

Yuu found that the spaces between them in the bed dissipated until there was practically nothing left, the edge of his soft tail tapping against their leg whenever he got to a part he was particularly excited about.

Another big yawn left him before he chuckled, giving them a soft smile "Huh... I feel like I haven't rattled on like that in months. Sorry about that." He apologized and cleared his throat. "I was supposed to be assisting you."

> "You are assisting me."

> "It's okay."

Yuu tentatively reached over and touched Jack's warm forearm. They could tell he was exhausted and knew how early he usually turned in. And he was willing to stay up, just for them?

But, it was the truth. Jack Howl *did* help them. They felt lighter having listened to their friend's vivid stories of a home he loved so much. Maybe it was the balmy Savanaclaw dorm itself but, Yuu felt a warmth that was rare in the drafty Ramshackle dorm. Or... maybe it was Jack. He emitted it after all, physically and when he spoke of his family. And with his tail, they didn't even need a blanket.

> "Why don't you relax? And I can read you the pages Mr.Trein assigned for both of us."

"Uh-" It looked like he was going to protest, then stopped. "I'd...like that." His tail thumped a little faster against Yuu's leg. "I guess that's better than me goin' on some more," He smirked. "You... got a good voice for readin'." Jack seemed to choke on his words a bit. "I mean, uh- Whenever it's your turn to read in class...I mean- I enjoy it!"

Yuu touched a hand to their swelling chest, they couldn't stop smiling.

They cleared their throat before beginning., "So..." Yuu read softly from a chapter of a section they were going over in class. And it wasn't before long that a snore sounded off from their left. Letting the bulky textbook fall to their lap, Yuu chuckled into their hand.

With one massive leg crossed over the other they could now see the paw pattern on the bottom of one of Jack's green slippers, his usually stern face slack in a peaceful slumber, and fluffy ears flicking occasionally.

> "Good night, Jack."

Yuu hummed peacefully, resisting the urge to touch those soft looking ears. Instead they stood, swiping up the shirt Jack had given them from the end of the bed to change. Maybe the weekend wouldn't be so bad after all.

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SLUMBER PARTY - LEONA

By Ren (bunnwich)

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Yuu's eyes scanned the dusty Savanaclaw hallway as they rapped on the door, grumbling softly. It was unusual for Ruggie to make such a last-minute request, but he was their friend, and the hyena had helped them out in tight spots before. His knowledge of leaky pipes and quick fixes for nearly any home repair project had been a lifesaver in the dilapidated dorm they currently called home. So, despite how stomach-turning this particular request was...they'd make do.

After knocking with no response, Yuu cautiously pushed open the half-ajar door. They gave Leona plenty of time to "prepare himself," and they couldn't wait to get this over with.

It wasn't that they hated Leona Kingscholar per se, but in their previous interactions, he had presented himself as less than animable company. His thick, dark hair was disheveled, and he wasn't wearing any of his usual jewelry. Instead, a yellow blanket with the signature geometric motif of the Savanaclaw dorm draped over his broad shoulders.

Yuu's eyes couldn't help but drift over his bare chest beneath the blanket and his wrinkled jeans with the top button undone—nothing had changed since they'd spent three nights here after Azul evicted them from their dorm.

"Whaddya want?" He spoke gruffly, his green eyes squinting down at them. He laid an arm on the doorframe as if he couldn't bear to hold himself up. It wasn't the same way he spoke to everyone they noticed. It was still grumpy but it had significantly less bite to it. He knew better now after all. After everything that had transversed between them, Yuu supposed they were at least...allies.

Leona blinked at them slowly, cocking an eyebrow at them.

They couldn't help it. His air of arrogance already made them vexed, propping their hands on their hips.

> "I was asked to come here...?"

> "Ruggie left me a note..."

They said, rolling their eyes slightly. It had been a long day—renovating their dorm, studying, keeping Grim in line, and managing the Ramshackle. The last thing they needed was to deal with another cat. "Ruggie he—" They started to explain.

"Whatever," Leona turned away, shrugging. He was already on his way back to the bed, but not before sneaking one last look over at Yuu before plopping down in his nest of blankets.

As he walked off, the door swung open more with the crossbreeze, making a horrible squeaking noise, it was practically crooked on its hinges.

Leona growled as his tail tapped the edge of the mattress. "I told Ruggie a hundred times to fix that damn door..."

Yuu crossed their arms, taking a step inside. **SLAM**-! That's when the door slammed close behind them from the cross breeze, making them nearly jump out of their skin.

They cleared their throat. “Anyway! I'm just here to-” Their eyes drifted around the messy room, they weren't the most...cleanly person themselves, especially given their circumstances, but they figured a prince would care a little more about their surroundings. Guess that’s what Ruggie was for, they chuffed aloud.

Leona rolled over, facing away from them, a smirk tugging at his lips as though he anticipated their reaction.

“I’m...here to wash your clothes. I’m helping Ruggie while he does a shift at the Monstro Lounge for Azul.” They made sure to punctuate their words clearly, so he understood that they would never do this of their own free will.

“So late? Tch, you couldn’t have come earlier?” He frowned, his tail still bouncing against the bed’s green covers. Moonlight spilled over his sheets, casting shadows that danced softly in the quiet room.

His words reminded Yuu of how tired they were.

Yuu let out a breath, trying not to let him get under their skin. “Look, I was busy. I have a lot to do, running a dorm.” They shrugged, slapping their hands against their legs. “Unlike some people...” They said in a whisper, somewhat aware he would hear.

He laughed at their jab, throwing his legs over the side of the bed and standing up again, swaying some as he walked up to them.

Yuu took a step back, creating much-needed space between them, resting their hands on their hips again. “I’m kind of on a schedule. Which ones are dirty?” Yuu asked, curling their lips as they eyed the enormous pile of clothes on the green sofa.

“Hmph, How should I know?” He hunched his shoulders, scratching his neck, “I think those over there. You figure it out.” he added smugly, imitating Yuu’s stance by propping his hands on his hips.

It was obvious Leona was toying with them, like a cat dangling a little mouse. No way was someone as smart and capable as him this incompetent. But Yuu took the bait.

“What? No!” they huffed, blowing a strand of hair out of their face. “If you can’t even do your own laundry, the least you can do is throw it in the right pile.”

“Mmph.” His ears flicked, but his face softened some, with the tiniest curl to the sides of his mouth. “You sound like Ruggie, but scarier.” He observed them as they walked over to the sofa crossing his arms across his chest.

After the day that Leona had overblotted something had shifted between them. Yuu wasn't aware if Leona knew what they had “seen.” The flashes of the past, the voices of Leona's brother and family. The snippets of his childhood, his personal memories. Yuu had never told him or anyone really. Was it even possible?

Besides Ruggie, Yuu was the first one that Leona had seen as he was waking up that day. It was the first time Yuu had seen the guy actually look...small, ashamed. Ever since that day, there was a shift in Leona's behavior toward them, even if subtle.

The difference between sandpaper and stone. Still hard, unyielding, and thoroughly stubborn, but no longer abrasive. A side he had revealed after the three days they spent here in his room, while Azul was appropriating their dorm.

It wasn't something spoken, but they knew now: the lion was all bark and rarely bite.

> “Sort them.”

They commanded simply up to him.

“What?” He retorted, baring his teeth.

“Sort the clothes out...” Yuu repeated slower. “...so I can wash them for you, okay?” They narrowed their eyes, crossing their arms too as he did. “Now, please.” They had said “please” but it had the feeling of another word.

At first, Leona laughed, throwing his head back at the audacity. But as the seconds passed, his laughter faded. Yuu stood their ground, staring up at him.

The man’s smug face faded to a tight frown. “Very well,” Leona finally conceded. He bent down, tossing the clothes into two distinct piles, never breaking eye contact. “If it’ll get you out of my hair so I can go back to sleep...”

Yuu didn’t move from their spot, even as Leona came uncomfortably close.

Eventually, he finished, grunting to signal he was done. Yuu resisted the urge to clap sarcastically as they gathered the clothes in their arms, barely able to see over the top.

“Thank you.” They attempted to smile, but they couldn’t seem to arrange their features correctly.They spotted a woven basket and stuffed the clothes into it, trying to ignore the silky cheetah-print underwear that slipped across their hand.

They tried to calm themself as they headed for the door.

“Leaving?” He questioned, still standing by the couch.

Yuu turned around and scoffed, what did he expect? For them to stay and hang out? “Yes! Why would I-” They laid their hand on the cool knob and jangled it roughly. “What the—?”

They took a breath, shaking their head as if that would change the reality. Please, they had already had such a day, please just let them leave here.

After a few more failed attempts, they felt a wall of warmth behind them, pressing against their back causing them to drop the basket in their hands. They hadn't even heard him come behind them.

Leona grabbed the knob too, pushing their hand aside.

> “I got it!”’

> “What are you doing?”

Yuu turned around, boxed in by the man now, one of the shoulders of his blanket had fallen down to his elbow crook.

The muscles of his forearm flexed as he roughly yanked at the knob by Yuu’s waist. “Apparently not,” He grumbled, eyes focused on his task. “For fucks sake, I told Ruggie it was broken a week ago.” He moved closer to Yuu as he rattled it, seemingly unbothered by the fact that he had sandwiched them against the door.

Yuu froze, a small involuntary squeak emitting from their mouth as he pressed against them. Their fists shook at their sides, not in the mood for games. All they wanted was to do the damn laundry so they could go back to their rickety, drafty dorm.

“Oh? Do I make you nervous, mouse?” He smirked. He let one hand drop, leaving one hand on the door’s frame. The undivided attention of his glowing green eyes shifted downward to Yuu. Right...some beastman could see in the dark.

“No, no. You...wish.” Yuu’s brows furrowed, pressing themselves further from him. They had never really been intimidated by Leona, even during their first meeting in the botanical garden.

“You sure?” He purred, tilting his head, a little glint of playfulness in his leering gaze. Did he think it was funny?

They dipped under his arm, escaping him.“Ugh. Aren’t you an all-

powerful mage? Just...use your magic to break it down."

He scoffed, propping one hand on his hip, turning his nose up at the idea. "I'm not wastin' my magic or destroying my door. We can just wait for Ruggie. What's the big deal?" He took a step back, though condescendingly bent himself to their level.

Yuu began shaking their head rapidly. "No, no! Not happening! We'll just call him!" They put out a hand expectantly. "Where's your phone?"

"Don't know. Probably not charged." He shrugged, backing up to the center of the room with a yawn, seemingly irritated that they hadn't played the part of timid little prefect in his game. "What's a' matter? I won't bite." There it was again, that smirk.

"Oh no...This isn't happening!" Yuu felt sourness settle in their guts, placing their whole body against the door, trying to use their shoulder to push it open, but instead bouncing off and falling backward to the wooden floor. "Ugh-!"

"Tch. Good luck," Leona began in a low voice. "I can hear most of the others down in the lounge, making a racket. If they're watching TV or something, those idiots will never hear you." He explained, stretching his arms over his head and pulling his blanket tighter around himself. "No point in getting all worked up, alright?"

Yuu skittered across the room and out onto the balcony, placing their hands on the railing, scanning for a way down. "Racket? What an old man..." They muttered, hoisting one foot onto the wood railing. From inside the room, Leona's eyes widened.

"Ey! What the hell are you doin'?"

"It's too far! Dammit!" Yuu cursed, backing up and collapsing onto the balcony floor as a breeze ruffled their thin, holey gray lounge shirt. It was something they'd found in the lost and found—like most of their clothes.

No point in spending money on clothes when food and necessities were more important. They shivered. "Shit..."

"Wanna be quiet? I'm trying to sleep," Leona's irritated voice came from behind them, along with the squeak of his bed.

"No! Why don't you—ugh!" Yuu stopped, clenching their fists and gritting their teeth. "Because I came here, and now I'll have no clean clothes for tomorrow, which means I can't go to class and—"

"So? Let the furball go on his own," Leona grunted, rolling onto his stomach.

"So?" they repeated. "There's a test tomorrow! If I'm not there to keep Grim in line, we'll get another D, and—"

"Hell," Leona dramatically plugged a finger into his ear. "Just wear something of mine, if that'll shut your yappin' up." He sounded irritated, but his eyes betrayed him. His ears laid back, relaxed.

> "Huh?"

> "I don't need charity from you!"

"Yeah, whatever. My family sends me stuff I don't want all the time. Don't even wear most of it," he shrugged, turning his face away. He chuckled softly. "It'll probably be too big for you, mouse. But if you see something that suits ya... just keep it."

"I- "Yuu swallowed, fighting the frustration welling up in their chest. They sniffed, wiping their face on the dirty sleeve of their sweater. They opened their mouth to fire back a snarky comment but thought better of it, walking over to the pile Leona had marked "clean." They weren't sure it inspired confidence.

They glanced down at their own sweaty, paint-stained shirt. A stillness settled over the room, broken only by distant cheers from the dorm

lounge below.

Leona waved a hand in the air, still facing away. “Who knows when Ruggie’ll be back? I told him not to bother me tonight, said I was going to bed early. Then you came and screwed everything up.”

“Me?!”

“So, you might as well be quiet and come to bed,” he muttered, briefly glancing over his shoulder as if to check if Yuu was still there.

Yuu blinked, too drained to argue anymore. “Fine. I’m over it,” they muttered, rummaging through the pile. It wasn't like they hadn’t shared a bed before and they certainly weren’t sleeping on the couch where Leona threw his dirty clothes.

They weren’t sure about school tomorrow but for now, Yuu managed to find a shirt at the bottom of the pile that was decent and gave it a cautious sniff. “Ew,” they grimaced. It had definitely been worn before, but it smelled relatively clean, or at least like him—musky, spiced with cinnamon, star anise, and maybe a hint of citrus. There was a hint of burning firewood. After spending three nights here. Yuu noticed some nights the dorm members would gather after dark to create small bonfires and tell stories.

The shirt was sturdy, with an intricate pattern sewn along the neck. It would do.

Lowering the tunic, Yuu shot a glare at Leona, who was watching them again. The way he stared at them, it always made them feel so singular. Like even in a crowd that they were the only two in the room. They couldn’t decide if it was invasive or not. His tail swayed as his chin rested up on one of his tribal print pillows.

“Hmph,” they ducked behind a pillar to switch shirts, tossing the dirty one onto the floor. What did it matter in a room like this?

When Yuu came back around, Leona sat up from his throne of pillows, his shining eyes tracking them as they crossed to the bed. They grumbled in frustration; it was far more comfortable than their bed back at Ramshackle. They yanked one of many throw blankets off the bed and cocooned themselves in it.

“Why me...?” they mumbled, glancing at the balcony as more cheers drifted up from below. If there was a party going on, why was Leona up here by himself?

Distracted, Yuu didn’t notice Leona shifting closer until he was practically on top of them, reaching over for something on the nightstand.

> “Hey!”

> “Get off!”

His chest was inches from their face and one of his braids bumped their nose. That was another thing about him. Like any cat, he didn't seem to understand...personal space. Just the other day he had grabbed Epel and Grim and tossed them over his shoulder while the three of them were doing a project together.

Though he knew better than to do that with Yuu, they simply wouldn’t allow it, beastman culture differences or not.

After trying to wiggle out of it, Yuu crossed their arms, giving up. “You finished?” They droned up at him, pinching their eyes shut, swatting the braids out of their face.

Leona ignored them, focused on retrieving something wooden. Yuu peeked over their shoulder to see him carefully setting up a chessboard.

“I thought you were tired,” they mocked.

He scoffed. “Not with those goons making a racket downstairs. If we’re

stuck in here, might as well see if you're any good."

"Very presumptuous," Yuu muttered, adjusting their borrowed shirt as it slipped off one shoulder.

> "I don't know how to play chess."

> "You can't ask, properly?"

"Really?" His green eyes shifted to the side. "Are you good at anything? Heh, I guess you are truly useless then."

"Wha—" Yuu's heart tightened at the word. It wasn't the chess or the fact that it was Leona saying it. It was because they had said it to themselves countless times before.

Useless. Nothing. No one.

As much as they tried to keep a stiff upper lip about it all: not having magic abilities in a school full of people who did, it weighed on them. Their mouth opened to retort, but nothing came out. "You're right," they said instead, turning away. Snatching a pillow and blanket, they moved to the couch.

They'd take the smell of dirty laundry rather than share any more space with him.

"Huh?"Leona sputtered, ears flattening against his hair. He hadn't expected that. He almost seemed disappointed at their passive response to his pawing.

"Hey, I said we're gonna play a game," he pushed, maintaining his usual gruff tone.

"Play with yourself," Yuu muttered, burying their face in the plush sofa. "No wonder you don't have any friends..." They huffed under their breath, but they knew he heard. They didn't really mean it, after all, they didn't have many friends either, so who were they to judge?

The rustling stopped, leaving only the distant sounds of the party outside. A heaviness settled in the room, and Yuu started feeling...guilty. Why? They reasoned. They shouldn't. The man was a bastard all the time, unwarrantedly, and had no problem hurting everyone's feelings. They shouldn't, but knowing what they did about Leona...

There was a long silence and Yuu let their eyes fall closed, resting their head on the couch. They may have fallen asleep if he hadn't called out to them.

"Come on," he scoffed. "That's bullshit, and you know it. You're good at pouting, for one. Annoying too..." He cleared his throat. "Besides, no big deal. I'll just...show you how to play. If I can teach Cheka, I can teach a stubborn little beast like you."

Yuu folded their arms and opened one eye.

> "Fine, since you're so desperate..."

> "Sounds...good."

They stood, pulling one of the blankets from the couch, and draping it around them. After being in here a while, they had kinda gotten used to the smell now. Besides, it was chilly with the windows open.

Leona's posture shifted. He sat up, crossing his legs and letting the blanket fall from his shoulders as his tail flicked in satisfaction. Yuu rolled their eyes. Why was it that this jerk always got what he wanted?

Leona's gaze lingered on them, especially their borrowed shirt.

"What? Something on it?"

"Nah," he said, turning his head to hide the softening expression Yuu

caught a glimpse of. “Nothing,” he grumbled, setting up the chessboard. “Nothing.” He bristled up once again, playing the part.

They shook their head, they didn’t understand all the games with him. “You know, if you wanted to play a game so badly, you coulda just asked nicely.”

Leona’s sharp eyes avoided their gaze yet again. “Yeah, alright, my bad.” He grumbled before going back to setting up the board for them.

He was about to say more when the door swung open with a loud thud.

“Ruggie!” Yuu jumped up from the bed. “I’m saved! Thank the-” They tapped their chin and thought for a second. “-The Seven?” Tossing off the blanket, they pumped both their fists in the air, “I’m free!”

Behind them, Leona muttered something under his breath.

“Really gotta fix that door,” Ruggie dusted off his hands, his pale blue eyes blinking in confusion when he saw Yuu in Leona’s shirt. “Huh? What’re you doing here, Yuu?”

Yuu tilted their head, mirroring his confusion. “You asked me to do Leona’s laundry tonight?”

Ruggie blinked and shook his head. “No, I didn’t.”

Yuu turned to Leona, who was suddenly very interested in the view outside. They didn’t have the mental energy to unpack it now. This was their ticket out of Savanaclaw.

“Well, anyway!” Yuu grabbed the laundry basket and made for the door. “I’m out! See ya, Ruggie!”

“Wait.” Leona’s voice was quieter than usual. “Ruggie, give ‘em...some money from my wallet. For laundry...and conditioner or whatever.”

Ruggie sighed. “But your wallet’s right there. You could easily—" He sighed again. “Never mind.” He fetched the wallet, counted out some marks, and handed them to Yuu.

They took the stack of marks slowly, resting the large basket on their hip. “Whoa, this is way too much—”

An aggravated sigh interrupted them. Leona, still turned to his chessboard, muttered, “See ya, Yuu.” He said simply, his voice low and soft and his tail limp and hanging off the bed.

Ruggie’s large eyes moved between them, bouncing back and forth a few times. “Uh, okay?” He shrugged. “Whatever, not really my style to look a gift horse in the mouth. Guess I’ll take the night off then! Shishishi! You should come over more often, Yuu,” he chuckled, moving for the door. “Night!”

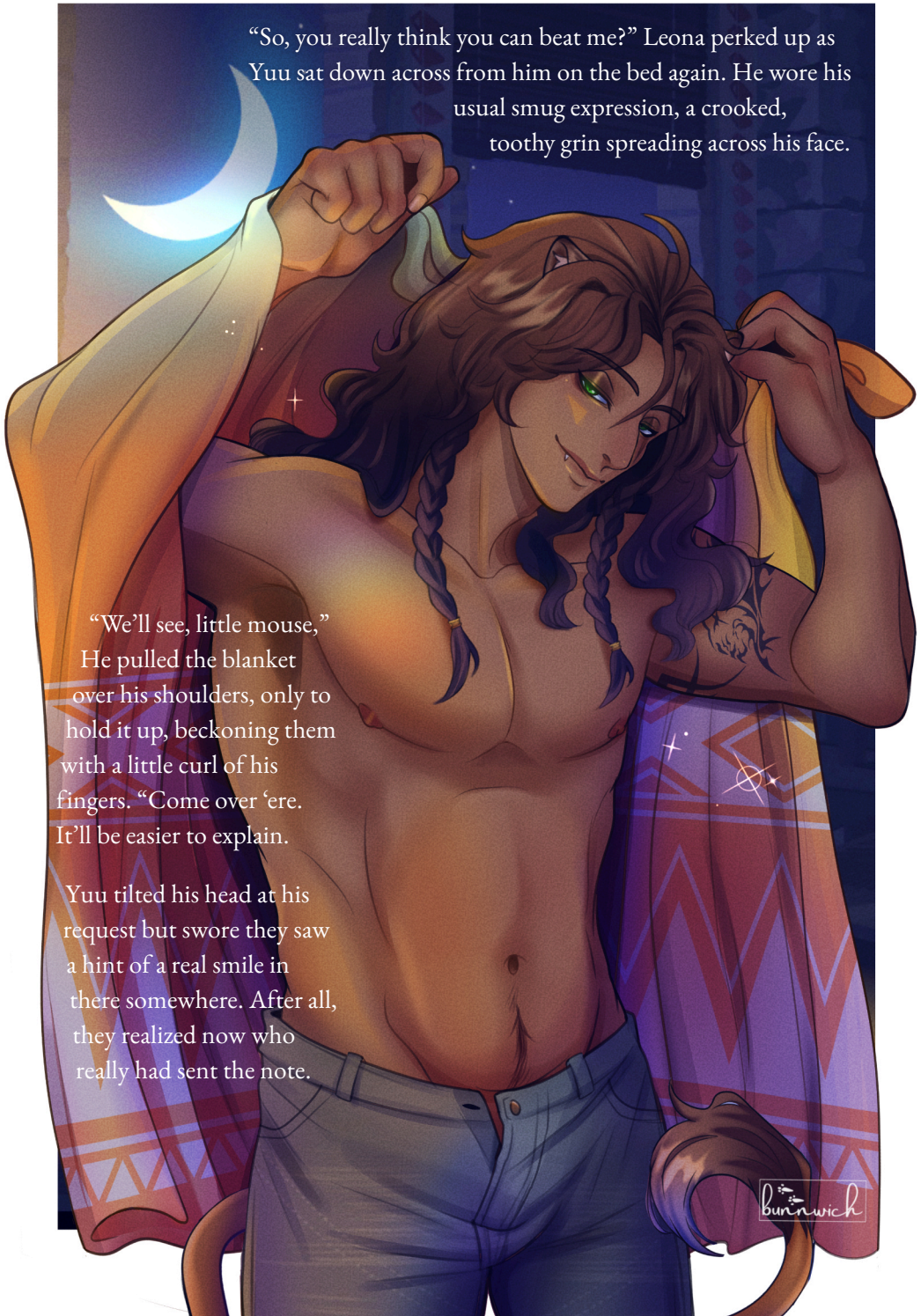
“Oh, uh-” Yuu stepped forward before looking down at the money in their hands. Even without counting, they could tell...it was a ridiculous amount.

As they stuffed the cash in their pocket, their eyes fell on the mystifying man on the bed again.

> “Actually... I think I'll stay a little longer.”

Yuu set down the basket of clothes by the door, wandering toward the center of the room. “Leona...he's gonna teach me how to play chess... which is a really stupid idea when you think about it.” They scoffed, running a hand back through their hair. “Because I’m just gonna kick his ass once I know how.”

Ruggie sighed, still bewildered. “Uh, okaaay. Well... I’ll leave you two to that. Night, for real!!” He slipped out, carefully closing the door so it wouldn’t jam again. “Damn... gotta fix that tomorrow,” they heard him mutter from behind the door.



NOT-SO WINTER WONDERLAND

By Alice

Detention sucks.

Detention sucks, and the only thing that sucks more than detention is having to do it with barely any circulation in your limbs because you're fucking freezing your ass off whilst working said ass off while Grim is curled up all cozy and cute in your worn second-hand (probably, uh, more like third-hand? Mayhaps even fourth-hand ...) scarf.

This is because Grim gives you a wide-eyed stare and you last about 0.1 seconds before melting (figuratively, you're pretty sure you're about two degrees away from freezing your ass off) and slowly unwrapping your scarf from your neck. That's just. .. how things work. It's as true a fact and as factual a truth as the sky is blue and grass is green.

Besides, you don't blame him. Like, yeah, kind of a jerk move on his end (as if you'd ever expected any differently), but NRC isn't exactly what you'd call a very hospitable place to be in right now(... like it ever was, but that's besides the point). You imagine things must be worse for Grim considering he's, like, a cat... guy... monster thing. (Or something????)

The whole campus is supposed to be enchanted or whatever to stay decently warm all year round, but apparently something happened (as it always does) and now you're stuck trudging through snow and frost and

ice for the allllllllll the way to Ramshackle and back for the "foreseeable future"- which, in Crowley language, means about until someone else at school decides to take matters into their own hands and do something about it.

Which. Would usually be your (unofficial) job, but you happen to have detention with Grim all week because of course you do, so you're stuck with nothing but the clothes on your back, zero madols to your name, and a bunch of classrooms you've gotta somehow manage to clean in the next 4 days.

... granted, you do have a faded red hat that Ace lent you after enough of your complaining the other day, worn and a bit scratchy, but it doesn't do anything to quell the creeping chill in your hands and neck. It also doesn't do anything to help with the ache in your arms from nonstop cleaning, soooo... yeah. Also, it's kinda itchy, so you're hesitant to count it as a pro right now.

At least, you think, shoving the broom you've been sweeping with into a little closet in the corner, Ramshackle ain't as ramshackle-y anymore. If it was, you and Grim would probably be just as transparent and floaty and your three ghastly roommates.

That is. You would be dead and therefore ghosts.

(Thank gods for Heartslabyul's help in getting the fireplace working properly instead of just spewing smoke all the time.)

The sound of the closet door clicking shut rouses Grim from his little catnap, and he blinks slowly at you. "Ya finally done now?"

"I would've been done sooner if you'd helped," you respond, even though you actually sort of really doubt it. Even if he did, somehow, by some sort of miracle decide to help with good intentions, you wouldn't trust him with about 99.5% of the work Crewel's making you do. And that 0.5% of trust that you would hypothetically have in him is paper thin and ready to break at a moment's notice.

"Mah, whatever," he whines out, flopping onto his belly as he watches you pack up your school bag, "my paws're cold. If you're done, let's get outta here already!"

You sigh, before putting your school bag on and reaching your arms out to pick Grim up- he's way heavier than the average cat is, but he's soft and fluffy and wearing your scarf, so you decide think it's only fair that you get the privilege of cuddling up to him while you walk back to your dorm.

Grim grumbles some more, but doesn't stop you from picking him up. It only takes a minute or two of him wiggling around in your arms for him to finally settle down (as difficult as he can be, you know better than to take the things he says and does at face value. He, like practically 99% of Night Raven College, just happens to be incredibly emotionally constipated).

It helps a little. The blue fire from his ears brushes against your cheeks as you start to make your way out of the main building and towards Ramshackle, soft and warm in a way that's like a weird semi-mixture of fire and fur. It's harmless- more so reminiscent of the way it feels to wear a thick sweater fresh from the wash than actual fire.

It isn't until you hear someone say your name that you nearly stumble still, looking around and then down to Grim, who's looking ahead and down the stairs right outside the school's main entrance- the stairs you just barely stopped yourself from falling down (no Ruggie needed!). You hear it again, and for a minute, you think that one of the ghosts might be trying to pull another prank on you, but, like... is it just you, or does the voice sound... familiar?

You jolt, trying (and failing) to stop yourself from stumbling forwards in an awkward attempt to steady yourself, limbs so cold and stiff you think

it may be a miracle they haven't snapped in half yet. But, lo and behold, Jack's there standing more than a little bit awkwardly just a few steps in front of you. He's wrapped up in a giant red scarf and jacket lined in fur that reminds you of his own- white and grey and fluffy- and looks like he's on his way back to the Hall of Mirrors after an afternoon class. His arms fall down to his sides, and if you didn't know better, you'd think he might have been readying himself to catch you had you fallen.

The both of you are silent for a moment. You think his brows might be furrowed, his mouth twisted into something stiff and displeased. You open your mouth to apologize on instinct (even though you literally didn't even do anything) before Jack interrupts you.

"The hell're you wearing?" You blink.

"... huh?"

You look down, and although the majority of your torso is obscured by Grim and the giant scarf he's wrapped up in, you know very well what you're wearing- a too-many-sizes-too-big uniform that you've yet to get properly fitted due to lack of time and no lack of BS to deal with.

... you haven't seen much of Jack since the whole contract ordeal a little while ago. While exams are over, the majority of students at NRC have been busy packing and planning for winter break- Ace and Deuce included.

Jack, too, you're guessing. He's mentioned how close he is to his family, before, so you're assuming that he's probably just as eager to go home.

You might not know him all too well, yet, but considering the budding friendship (or something akin to it) between the two of you, you wouldn't really figure him to be the type to scold you over your wardrobe choices of all things. If anything, you'd expect that from Pomefiore's housewarden, but, like. Not Jack.

"Uhm, my uniform?" You answer.

You're about to ask why he asked when something cold and wet lands on your nose. You wrinkle it, displeased, and go to wipe it off with the back of your free hand- but the moment your hand falls back to your side, something lands on your nose again.

And again.

And again.

"Woah! It's snowing," Grim exclaims before immediately sticking his tongue out to try and catch snowflakes on it. He manages to continually fail spectacularly, and you have to go back to holding him up with two arms to keep him from wiggling out of your grip and face planting onto the stairs.

You turn your attention towards Jack, who's gone silent as he tilts his head towards the sky, and you swear you can see quick flashes of his tail moving from side to side in... could that be..?

Jack looks... relaxed. Content, even. His shoulders aren't pulled taut together like they usually are, his jaw isn't clenched like it usually is, and his ears are droopier than usual. Or, at least, you think they are. When you tilt your head and squint, you swear you can see it.

The light greys and whites of Jack's hair and fur seem to almost sparkle as bright as the stars in the sky, and it's only when he reaches a (surprisingly gentle) hand out in front of him that you realize it isn't the sky he's looking at- it's the snow.

... you daresay that Jack looks happy

You don't voice this thought at loud, though, or dare to comment on any of your newfound observations. If there's one thing you've learned from your time at NRC, it's that the majority of the students here have walls as high as the moon and egos as big as the sun- and while Jack might not

exactly fit into the latter category, he more than makes up for it in the former.

Despite your decision to stay quiet, it's clear that Jack's noticed your (unabashed) staring from the way his brow furrows slightly.

He's back to looking you up and down, before he glances at himself for a moment- and, for some reason, starts... unwrapping his scarf from his neck?

And then he holds it out towards you. You blink.

"You shouldn't be out in the cold without proper clothes," Jack says. He averts his eyes from you, and despite the edge to his scolding, you think you might detect a bit of concern in his voice. And- ohhh, are his cheeks a little bit redder than usual????

You try not to let your creeping grin show on your face as you play dumb. "Uh, am I supposed to... "

Jack gives you a look that reads, 'what the hell else are you supposed to do with it??', but otherwise doesn't say anything- his scarf still outstretched in his hand.

You really, really wanna take it because again, cold!, but you think that Ace might be rubbing off on you a bit too much because instead of taking it, you continue to play absolutely stupid. "Won't you be cold without it?" you ask.

"I'm used to the cold," Jack says. "Take it. You'll freeze if ya walk all the way to Ramshackle in just that."

Your jaw almost drops from the way he insists on insisting (you were halfway expecting him to rescind the offer) and ... you can't bring yourself to move. You're frozen.

Not from the cold, but from... (ugh, as cheesy as it sounds) the warmth

that starts to pool at your cheeks and spread out to the tips of your toes in something you can only describe as friendship!

"Myeh!" Grim jostles around in your arms, making you flinch back in fear of his dumb little claws (seriously, those things make him even more of a hazard than he already is)- and, in the process of flinching, Grim manages to jump out of your grip and onto the floor, his arms barely visible from where he's drowning in fabric, but still very much so crossed in displeasure. "Just put it on already so ya don't freeze to death or whatever," he snaps. '"S already bad enough we gotta spend our weekends sweepin' up classrooms no one's even usin'... now I've gotta deal with you sneezin' all over the place, too."

Awwww. That's Grim language for "I love you and please don't freeze to death". How sweet. Between Grim and Jack worrying about your health, you think you might just feel cared for.

"Thank you," you mutter, almost. .. sheepish? No, no, that isn't right- sheepish is too tame. You think your legs might be turning to jelly. You think your heart might be thumping. You think your face might be giving that one ldia guy's hair a run for its money because Seven, is it on fire.

Could it be, that... that you're... flustered?

You don't waste any time wrapping Jack's scarf around your neck, sinking into the soft fabric to try and hide your face because wow, now you're the one all embarrassed. It's warm, and soft in a way that makes you wonder what it must be made out of.

... and the imperfections in it make you wonder whether or not it might be homemade. Which. You don't bother asking about, because you doubt any of the boys at this school have the ability to admit to wearing anything handmade from their family. (Except, like, maybe Deuce.)

HOME REMEDIES AND CHAOS

By Inky

Sage Island had never really been known for its mild weather conditions, though the two magical schools anchored on each end seemed to never have issues as various fairies and magic artifacts kept the weather relatively balanced. Every once in a while however a bad storm would arrive and no one really knew to prepare because the signs for it weren't really there. The magic in the air messed with the weather perception of the beastmen just enough that they couldn't tell and the many different smells in the air made it difficult to tell there would be rain for any more 'normal' person.

Such conditions were exactly how Jack Howl and the prefect of Ramshackle ended up getting surprised by a sudden pouring rain on Jack's morning run, that he somehow got the prefect to join him for that day. They were absolutely drenched once back at their respective dorms, Jack having brought the prefect back to Ramshackle, narrowly avoiding the beginning of lightning and thunder that day.

It was assumed to be alright, however a few days or so later when it still occasionally rained but the storm had passed, the prefect was not showing up to their classes. That, of course, raised suspicion. How could it not, after all, considering the prefect had rather good attendance. Still it was brushed off as most students were under the impression the prefect had simply been sent out on some business for the headmage, as would usually be the case.

It was odd when they didn't show up for the day after that either but by the third day? Panic all around. Really, it was like the school was crumbling around everyone in real time. The prefect's sudden absence showed how much they were doing for this school, although no student should ever be subjected to so much work. There was, for example, an issue with the pipes of the botanical gardens, forcing the students to have to water everything by hand with hoses and watering cans. The storm had caused it but none dared to try and fix it, since the piping was old and complicated.

Another issue was one of the lights in professor Trein's classroom, its lightbulb had burst mid lesson and no one could replace it because they could not identify what kind it was. Was it fixable with magic? Valid question, unfortunately not, the lightbulbs were also a bit old and the inscriptions had smudged off, besides, magic was only a temporary solution because it would break quicker than before.

Though those were only two incidents, there were plenty more all across campus and in the individual dorms that the prefect would usually fix. Mostly all small things but that quickly combined into a bigger issue with how quickly in succession they happened. And with those came, of course, the agitated mood among the student body which had gotten more rowdy within just those three days of the prefect having seemingly disappeared.

All of those things were reason enough for concern to brew in the minds of the prefect's closest friends, including one Savanaclaw student named Jack Howl. So that day, after classes, the white haired wolf beastman made the somewhat long trek to Ramshackle. He knocked at first but nothing. He knocked again.. and there it was! Grim opened the door! And the cat creature seemed more than happy to see the big guy.

"Mraaaa! Jack! You couldn't have had better timing!" Grim just about shrieked, which had Jack's ears twitching and his eyes slightly widening, his brows furrowing. He was about to question it but he was led into the old dorm by the grey cat in an almost frantic fashion if he didn't know any better. And he soon figured out exactly why. At the end of the hallway leading upwards and at the foot of the stairs laid a *very* passed out prefect. They were facing upstairs so at least they hadn't fallen down from the top of said stairs but the sight had him bolting over in concern immediately. He knelt down and turned them onto their back to make sure they weren't otherwise injured, they weren't, but they were very much passed out, their face was flushed and they were sweating and shaking at the same time. Gingerly he placed his hand on their forehead only to slightly recoil almost immediately from the temperature.

A fever. The prefect had a really high fever. He breathed out some sort of sigh of relief, even if he wasn't too happy they were sick. It was simply that he was glad they weren't injured. He could imagine why too and it was definitely his fault. The garbage weather must've done their immune system in and knowing ramshackle, there was probably something making it worse in this old dorm. At least he knew what to do, considering he had younger siblings.. but the prefect was from another world, so he'd just have to hope what helped in this world would work.

"Grim, tell the other house wardens the prefect's got a fever. I'll get them to bed and make sure they're doing okay. Stop by Sam's on the way back for some medicine." He said to Grim, who had no will to object and quickly rushed off to do just that. And with that Jack and the prefect were alone. Gently he picked up the passed out human, it wasn't an issue, they didn't weigh much to him after all. He had to wander a little to find where to go but eventually ended up in the prefect's room. It wasn't the first time he was in there but it always hit him again that while it seemed so much like the prefect, there was just something off about it and that off feeling always came from the mirror over the little fireplace. But he could never tell why. That didn't matter right now though, what mattered was that the prefect had to get better quickly, so he placed them on their currently messy bed and began looking for a thermometer. It took a bit of rummaging but he found one in the adjacent bathroom in one of the closets and took their temperature. 39.5°C (103°F) is what that thermometer read, which was concerning, considering the fever was just about teetering on dangerous.

He let out a grumble of concern, Jack's ears folding back in worry. Until there was medicine he'd simply have to make do with house remedies though.. so as the prefect rested he heated up some water to about 30° and added a cup of apple cider vinegar. It was a hassle finding everything, he was surprised there even was apple cider vinegar in the first place. He even almost burned himself on the old stove that the prefect had in the kitchenette of Ramshackle. He took four towels as well, carrying them up along with the warmed up water and sat down on the edge of their bed with a sigh, his lips pressing into a thin line as he observed the prefect's obviously fevered condition as beads of sweat rolled down their forehead, making their hair cling to their forehead. He would have liked to draw them a bath but he didn't want to disrespect their privacy so severely, instead he pulled up the legs of the prefect's sleepwear, trailing his dark hands up the skin as he did so, giving their lower leg a reassuring squeeze,

even if it was more for himself than anything. Carefully he wrapped their lower legs in the towels, which he would drench in the warm water mixture, before wrapping the dry towels around them as well to keep the bedding clean and give the prefect some proper calf compresses. His were never as neat as his mother's or father's.. but he tried and they looked fine.

He sat there waiting for a while, at some point the prefect started mumbling about ridiculous things, something someone sleep talking would do. At some point he was sure he'd heard them muttering french, which was probably rook's influence, but here and there he swore some Shaftlandian slipped from their lips, which had his ears twitching and his tail raised in curiosity. They didn't speak that language, did they? No he was sure. Perhaps they'd picked it up from him or Vil? Who knew.. he could ask them once they woke up. Actually he should prepare them some food. He saw some cans of chicken noodle soup in the kitchenette.. so he did just that. He didn't feel like he could sit still any longer anyway. Eventually Grim returned with a few bags of things. Mostly from the other house wardens and vice house wardens.. and anyone that Grim had told about the prefect's condition. Jack gave him an update on that as well, saying he would teach Grim what to do in case he was alone with the prefect again. Grim did his best to learn. And eventually the Adeuce duo stopped by as well! Epel too! So he spent some time telling them what to do as well and honestly? It felt like it was too much work for a little bit considering the chaos that this friend group brought. But if it was for the prefect.. maybe he wouldn't mind doing it for a long time yet. Not that he'd admit it, of course.. but he enjoyed taking care of the prefect, even if their friends did make it hard at times.

THE FABLED SAVANACLAW KARAOKE NIGHT

By Alestra

Savanaclaw was known to be full of tenacious, powerful and oftentimes rowdy students. One could describe a stereotypical personification of a Savanaclaw student as athletic, determined and tenacious (and depending on who you ask, some might be inclined to say bull-headed as well).

That being said, there's always a hidden side and internal secrets to every dorm. Like how Octavinelle no longer holds all-you-can-eat-buffets after a student single-handedly ate almost all the food prepared for the last event, Savanaclaw has its own secrets too.

For example, their weekly Friday karaoke nights.

"Leona!" Ruggie called out, peeping his head into Leona's room, where the dorm leader had been enjoying a nice nap. Begrudgingly, the dorm leader lifted his head in mild annoyance.

"What?"
The hyena beastman gave his signature laugh. *"Shishishi~* It's Friday night."
Leona groaned and buried his head into his pillow further, his ear twitching at the reminder. "I know. And the answer is still no."

Ruggie pouted. “But the others already said they wanted you to be present! Some of the boys even got the hot pink halter tops and white skirts for the occasion! And they even got *you* an outfit!”

At that, Leona pulled his face out of his pillow to stare at Ruggie in disbelief. *“What?”*

Just then, loud girlypop Y2K music blared through Savanaclaw’s hallways.

“Oh Sevens...” Leona seemed thoroughly horrified and as the first of the lyrics rang out, his lion ears pressed itself downwards.

Seeing Leona wither up on the bed - whether it was the music, the somewhat off-key and shrill singing or the horrific mental image of the whole event itself - Ruggie shrugged and left the dorm leader to his suffering. He, on the other hand, had no intention of missing out everyone’s reaction to tonight’s performance, especially from the more uptight students like Jack. Speaking of which-

“This is horrible,” Jack could only mutter, watching a group of five of his seniors belting their hearts out to a recent hit song called ‘Toxic Wild Obsession’. The pink heart sunglasses he wore (the rule for tonight’s karaoke night was to wear pink) did nothing to protect him from the horrors of his performing upperclassmens’ exaggerated and...*passionate*, *enthusiastic* twerking as they shook their hips aggressively in hot pink tops and short and sequined skirts. Ruggie on the other hand, was happily recording and cackling his head off at the sheer chaos of the session. “Are you kidding?! This is pure gold, *shishishi~* Of course, it’s not like I’d ever do something so horrible as to put it out on social media,” Ruggie replied, unable to help the wide grin on his face as he recorded the spectacle.

“Besides, what happens in Savanaclaw’s karaoke night stays in Savanaclaw’s karaoke night.”

Jack nodded, not sure how to feel about it all. This was vastly different from his former expectations of his dorm. Before he entered NRC, his younger self had fantasized it as a strong and regal dorm with dignity and pride. During the little Spelldrive incident, he had been devastated by his dorm leader’s willingness to resort to underhanded tactics and how the whole dorm seemed to discard their ethics to secure that one win against Diasomnia.

This...this however, blossomed an entirely new feeling he couldn’t describe. Hell, he wasn’t even sure if he wanted to know *what* exactly that feeling was. The best he could do was explain it as ‘a sense of his soul leaving the body and frozen fascination’.

“T-That aside!” He managed to stutter out, finally able to tear his gaze away from the cursed yet intriguing performance to turn to Ruggie. “Where’s Leona? I didn’t see him.”

“He’s sulking in his room. Don’t worry, this won’t affect anything, *shishishi~*”

Jack’s eyes widened. “You mean, Leona will actually do it?”

“Yep!” Ruggie grinned toothily, his elation and excitement evident. “The people have spoken, and they cannot be silenced. Just you wait.”

With that slightly ominous sentence, Ruggie walked off, leaving Jack alone once again to suffer through the uncharacteristic pinkness Savanaclaw had seemed to wholeheartedly embrace tonight.

Before he knew it, Jack had sat through an hour of his dormmates’ singing, and even enjoyed himself at some points. Eventually, a slower song played next and the host for the night spoke up.

"My Savanaclaw kin, before the highlight of the show commences, we want to take it slow and easy with a *very* popular love song dated from the King of Beasts' time. Don't be shy, sing your heart out and clap along!"

Jack's ears perked up as the first notes filled the air. His mother used to hum that song when she was putting him and his siblings to sleep. Melancholy and a twinge of homesickness hit him, memories of his childhood rising up to the surface. Of him and his little siblings huddling together around the fire after playing in the snow, his mother gently humming lullabies to them. His father slow-dancing and serenading his mother when the song played on the radio in their homey little kitchen. It was unmistakable.

'Can You Feel the Love Tonight?'

Jack did. He felt the love tonight. And it brought a tear to his eye. *I miss them.* As Jack thought idly, he felt someone nudge his shoulder. It was one of the students from his cohort, a panther beastman student Jack hadn't really talked to. Seeming to sense the aloof student's melancholy, the student gave Jack a reassuring smile.

"Brings back memories?" He asked, looking over at the students currently performing the song. "I'm not familiar with this one, but it has a very slow melody. Very...romantic, I guess. It's nice to listen to."

"Yeah," Jack replied, not exactly used to having casual one-on-one talks like this. "it's...memorable to me."

The panther student reclined in their beanbag chair. "I see." An awkward silence filled the air. "S-Sorry, I'm not good at conversations. Usually other people start 'em."

"...Thanks, I suppose," Jack said finally, not quite used to people approaching him still, despite meeting students like Ace, Deuce or the Prefect. Some of the other Savanaclaw students were still a little touchy about his...*involvement* about sabotaging Leona's attempts to win the Magishift tournament, but it seemed like more people were starting to slowly get over their disdain for him.

Noticing his awkwardness, the student held out their hand for a handshake. "I'm Kanan."

"Jack Howl," he said, giving the smaller student a firm handshake and an affirming nod. Never a man of much word or theatrics, Jack Howl was known for insisting on being alone. But maybe, just for tonight, this small act of knowing a dorm mate a little better could be an exception.

"And now, the moment you've all been waiting for!"

"Ruggie, don't you dare-"

All heads turned to as resident mom Ruggie burst in, followed by Leona in... a pink crop top, white booty shorts and thigh-high platform boots.

Yeah, no. This had to be a dream. This was way too much for Jack to handle. Glancing over to his new companion, he saw the same horrified look on their face which he imagined was akin to how his face looked as well. Kanan glanced back at him, their eyes meeting in horror and the vague sense of 'You're seeing this too, right? I'm not just going insane?'. One more way of solidifying their acquaintance-ship; trauma bonding via seeing Leona's shapely bottoms defined by his shorts.

"Savanaclaw, the time has come!" Ruggie yelled, raising his hands. Very protestingly, Leona's arms followed suit as well.

Oh. Ruggie's using Laugh with Me on Leona. No wonder the poll was sent out privately to the other Savanaclaw students, Jack thought, still trying to process the spectacle before him.

Ruggie - and a very loud and unwilling Leona - then proceeded to burst into a very sexy song by a popular girls' group, accompanied by some of Savanaclaw's members as back up dancers and singers.

"You're...also seeing this, right?" Kanan asked, their brown eyes unable to peel itself away from the performance. There was a look of abject horror but still they couldn't help themselves as they recorded Leona, who was currently humping the stage along with the rest of the dancers to Soso Jiwa's notorious hit "Karma Effed Around". It was like a boy band stage performance, but not sexy.

Jack slowly nodded. "Sevens help us..."

Still, even as he said that, he felt a peculiar sense of belonging. If he'd been asked whether he'd want out of it, something in his heart said he wanted to stay. The loud, riotous cheers (or maybe some of them were howling in horror at the display, the dorm was too uproarious for him to tell for sure) and the chaotic atmosphere didn't feel unwelcoming anymore. For this night at least, any unease he felt from upperclassmen taunting him and mocking him for going against Leona's plan seemed to dissipate. Tonight, everyone was family, a pride of Savanaclaw members, as things should be.

LEONA GETS HIGH

By Kouro

In the Botanical Garden in NRC, Yuu walked in to find Leona after he didn't show up for class, again. It took them a few minutes, with the sheer amount of lush greens in it, and spotted the lion's tail poking out under the green leaf. They hunkered down and pulled the leaf up to find a sleeping Leona, snoring softly. Yuu chuckled and poked his cheek to wake him up but it didn't work.

"You asked for it, kitty," they said with a mischievous smile. They got a small vial of catnip from Professor Trein as a reward for watching over Lucius over the weekend when he went to the doctor. The Prefect twisted the cork of the vital and poured it onto their hand. They put it on Leona's nose and his nose twitched before waking up with his eyes dilated and purring.

Yuu chuckles died down when they realized Leona grabbed their waist, dragged them into his sleeping spot and nuzzled his head in their neck, licking them before making them turn to him.

"What did you do, Herbivore?" The lion snarled, looking at the Prefect with annoyance.

"I feel all warm and fuzzy thanks to you," he continued, licking them in a motherly way before going back to sleep with soft snores. Yuu felt their ribs being crushed and tried to wiggle out of his death grip but it was useless. They saw their phone right next to the Dormleader and tried to reach it but his tail whipped it out of the way like it knew Yuu was going to try to call for help.

The phone hit a tree and cracked a bit before the figure of Ruggie Bucchi, holding a meat stick and their phone.

"Shishishi, How did you get this position?" Ruggie said, using his signature bottle spray laugh and holding their phone up in a teasing way.

Yuu glared daggers at them before sighing, "Do you want the long story or the short story?" Ruggie scratched his head before chuckling, "Short."

"Basically, I put catnip on Leona, and now I'm stuck in his death grip as he sleeps," They grumbled, crossing their arms. Ruggie's face turned into an 'Are you kidding' expression and facepalmed.

"Are you an idiot?" Ruggie said as he waved the meat stick near his upperclassmen nose which twitched and Leona opened one eye, "Is that the meat I asked for lunch?"

Ruggie nodded and Leona lazily grabbed the exposed bone and took a voracious bite, and started chewing on it. Yuu tried to get out of his grip again but it tightened.

"Leona! Let me go!" Yuu glared at him before Leona looked at them with annoyance, again.

"No," he said with no remorse and continued eating the meat. They groaned and punched him in the face, making him release Yuu. The Prefect stood up shakily, trying to find their footing after their legs became numb.

Leona growled, rubbing his cheek. How dare Yuu punch him in the face and get away with it?!

“You asked for it, herbivore!” Leona rolled up his sleeves and punched them back in the face, making them stumble backwards. Yuu got pissed and punched their stomach but was stopped by his hand, holding their wrist and tugging it.

“Hands off!” They said as they kicked his stomach and a few minutes of fighting caught the attention of Professor Crewel and he walked in, donning a thick black and white coat under a tux. He used his magic to stop Leona and the Prefect from beating each other to a pulp. The Alchemy professor held them by the collar of their uniforms and dragged the arguing duo to detention.

“You put catnip on me!”

“So what?! I thought it would be fun!”

“It wasn’t fun! I could’ve crushed you herbivore!”

“Don’t place the blame on me!” Yuu huffed, glaring at Leona. “It was your fault!”

“Quiet pups!” Crewel yelled as Leona grumbled and Yuu yelped and shut up.

At the detention room in 3-F, Yuu and Leona were given stacks of homework to do as they spent their 3-hour detention.

Crewel went down the stairs, took a seat at the teacher's table, and started reading a book on how to train puppies. Leona and Yuu glared at each other, making nonexistent insults to each other and watching each other do the homework assigned by Professor Crewel.

The detention room was bleak. The usual Night Raven College classroom but with some posters like ‘Behave’ and some random ones. The windows had an orange and yellow hue outside, noting it was almost night. Yuu looked outside with an annoyed expression on their face, glaring back at the Lion before going back to doing their own work.

Leona finished quickly as usual and yawned. They looked at him and felt a wave of anger towards him. They can’t work that fast.

They were slow. They grabbed their pencil and started working faster then ever but all the answers were wrong. They fixed them before Leona saw and his eyes narrowed.

“Oi herbivore, what are you doing?” Leona asked before leaning towards the Prefect’s work. “Don’t look!” Yuu said as they covered their work and glared at them.

Once detention was over, it was night. The starry night sky with the cool breeze as Yuu’s legs were numb from sitting so much and Leona had to carry them. Walking to the dorm, Yuu yawned, their eyes half-lidded and nodding off.

“Damn Herbivore, already sleepy? You are damn weak,” Leona chuckled as he carried a sleeping Yuu into his dorm room and licked them. On his bed, he placed them on the right side and he went on the left side. He liked Yuu for their stubbornness and cute looks and kissed their forehead. He closed his eyes and let himself sleep with them.

That night was calm, with Yuu and Leona sleeping and Rook causally stalked them in the trees. “Olala~,” Rook said, putting on his binoculars and taking a picture.

FROM DUST TO DUST

By Soru, Art by Kouro

The sun hangs low on the horizon, orange and brown and yellow and pink all filtering through the clouds and straight into his eyes hard enough to make them hurt, but right now, Leona could care less. Balcony doors wide open, he lounged on the couch in front of his bed, feeling the rare savannah wind course through his braided hair- a rare respite from the unfeeling heat.

It's been a while since you've been so empty, isn't it? Returning from NRC back to the Sunset Savannah put Leona under a lot of eyes, curious about his prowess as a mage and his views on the policies his brother was heading, and like any reasonable person under a lot of pressure, he quietly did his work and left the scene like a well-oiled machine of a criminal.

But even well-oiled machines have their limit, and now, Leona couldn't wait for his internship to start, gruelling in something familiar like the dust of his home in search of natural resources that could actually help develop his home. The door to his room opens behind, and Leona's ears turn in a manner of receiving the technically unwanted guest.

"Water, my Prince. The Crown Princess requested it."

"Fine." With a bow he didn't have to look at, the servant exits quietly, and once again, Leona is all alone again. He remembers having a conversation with Ruggie around this time of the day before leaving for what was technically called and considered home- something that itches at his brain no matter how hard he tries to shove it into some random box in the back of his brain.

"You done packin'? Anything you leave behind is mine." Ruggie asks as he chucks a bottle of water at Leona, and he catches it with ease, gulping the contents in almost one go.

"Yeah. Keep whatever's left, or sell it."

"You okay, Boss? Or are ya feeling nostalgic or happy we won't be in the same year?"

"You ever think about why we're here, and whether we deserve something better?"

Ruggie doesn't speak, but then again, he never did when Leona got like this. It was a rare look into the part of himself he kept hidden from everyone else, and only Ruggie was allowed to peer in on occasion. Maybe today was such an important occasion that it had to make itself known.

"Well, I think it's just enough to survive, Leona-san."

"That's all you and I have been thinking about and doing. Surviving is okay, it's enough, but is it?"

Ruggie shifts a little on his feet, before levelling green eyes with blue-grey ones. He's clearly uncomfortable, but Leona breathes as he presses on.

"We've done this song and dance before, Leona-san. It got us both almost killed. So until I am safe enough to live, I am content enough to survive."

"Look at you spouting wisdom like you're all grown up," Leona teases, a smirk on his face.

"Yeah, well, when you get like this, someone has to spout existential

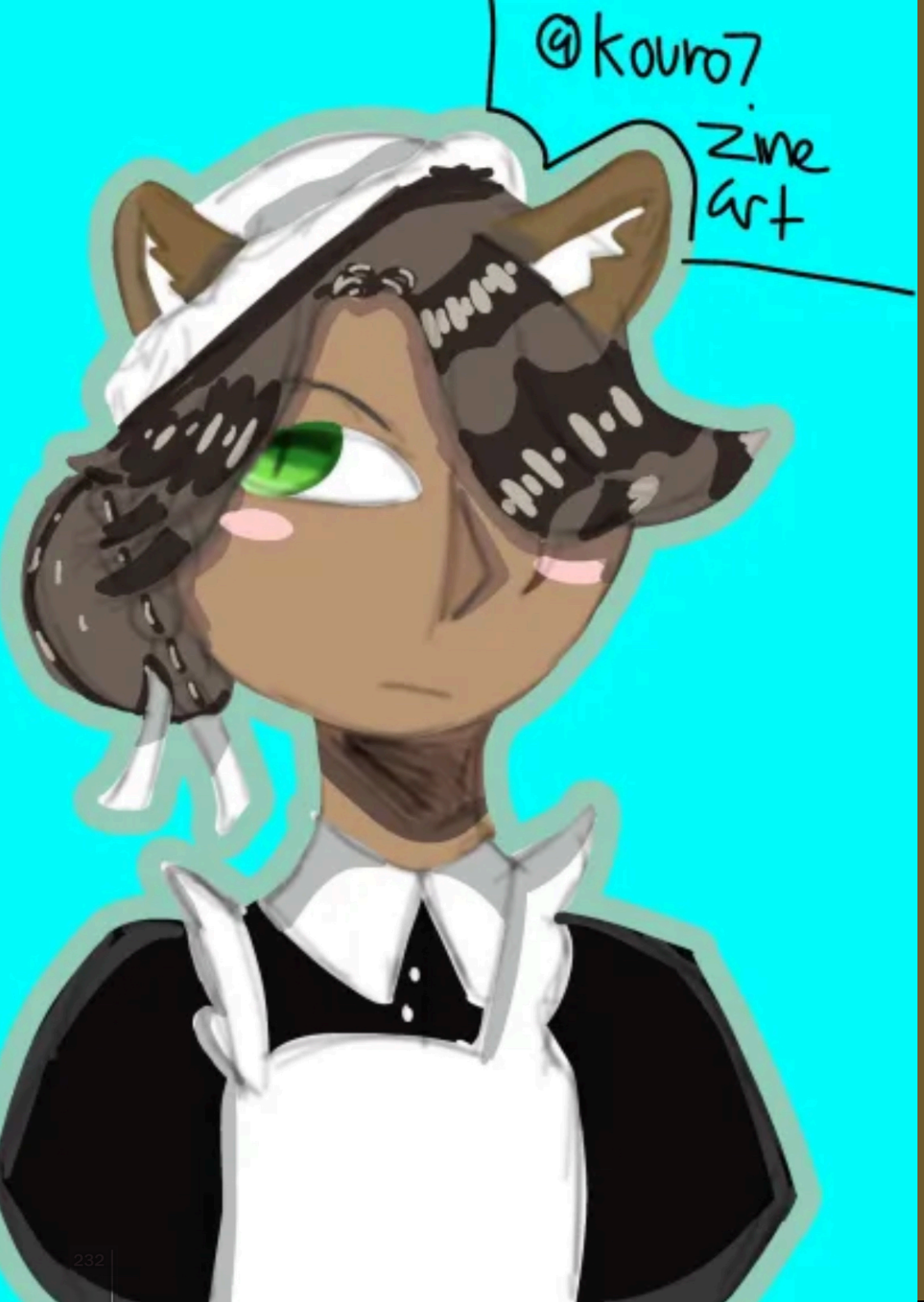
bullshit wisdom otherwise you'll drag everyone down with you." Ruggie chuckles at Leona's exaggerated eye-roll, chucking the pillow at his head. "Enough from you now. Go back, rest, and do your thing. The next time I see you in the papers, it better be because you did something good."

"Oh yeah? Define good."

"I don't know. Leona Kingscholar saves the economy and uplifts the poor versus Leona Kingscholar found near Honey Street peddling substances. Which sounds better?"

"Shut your trap."

Sighing, Leona blinks at the sky, the gentle moon blinking back at him. Sighing and stretching, Leona shuts the balcony doors and their elaborate curtains before he goes for a quick pre-dinner shower, and now he knows not to pay attention to the dust swirling outside. From dust to dust is the way of life, but there's no way in heaven or hell, if those exist, that he won't go screaming.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CHECKMATE?

By Fungi

Life is one big chessboard.

This is the mindset that Leona has abided by ever since he was young.

It's the easiest way to make sense of the world around him.

People are forever bound to positions given to them upon birth with no hope of changing, such as how a pawn has no hope of becoming a king.

Everyone has a finite amount of actions they can take, which are clearly defined, leaving whether or not they succeed as a matter of skill.

Which also means that luck, too, is calculable and thus, predictable.

Or at least, it should be.

That is, until the school's spelldrive tournament happened and everything fell apart like a harsh wave crashing into a sand castle.

And because of such a stupid plan, too. To this day, Leona is mortified that he got blindsided by such a ridiculous plan, thought up by a magicless herbivore, no less.

Well, there's no way he'll let himself get played like that again.

Much like he did with Azul, Leona decides to observe how the herbivore strategizes.

His plan for knocking the Octavinelle housewarden down a peg gave Leona some good initial insights, such as how he places a LOT of faith in the people who have the shallowest reasons to help actually pulling through. He should consider himself lucky that Leona had a deeper reason to help than what he gave.

But that's not enough for him. Being lucky is not a strategy and clearly not the only factor at play letting a magicless nobody pull the wool over the eyes of TWO separate housewardens. It baffles him to think that both him and that octopunk actually got suckered in by those schemes.

Ok, now Leona's getting angry.

Simple observation isn't enough this time. There's only one way to get to the bottom of this irritating little conundrum.

Portable chessboard in hand, Leona begins the trek to the place the herbivore almost lost with that gamble of his, otherwise known as Ramshackle dorm.

After knocking on the door, Leona hears a ruckus on the other side and the sounds of both the Prefect and his feline companion yelling before the sound of footsteps approaches the entrance.

The door then opens, revealing the Prefect in his infuriatingly enigmatic glory.

"Oh, Leona! Hi! It's great to see you!" He greets the lion warmly, "What brings you here?"

'Figuring out what makes you tick.' Leona thinks to himself, but what he actually says is, "I was bored and thought you'd be able to amuse me with a game of chess."

The simplest of lies, one that any other person at this school would see through and reject instantly, but the Prefect smiles nonetheless.

"Well, I don't know if I can really provide the mental stimulation you're looking for, but if that's how you want to spend your afternoon, then why not, I guess." He responds while stepping to the side to allow Leona in.

Leona pulls up a chair to the table in front of the lounge couch and starts setting up the board as the Prefect rushes to the kitchen for refreshments.

After coming back with water and snacks, the Prefect takes his place on the couch in front of the white pieces leaving Leona with the black.

"Myeh! So how does this 'Chess' thing work, anyway?" Grim asks while hopping up beside the Prefect and shoving chips in his face.

crunch

"Well, both players take turns moving one of their colored pieces at a time across the board in an attempt to capture their opponent's king piece. And each piece has its own way of moving to account for," The Prefect answers while picking up one of his pawns and moving it forward one space, "For example, your pawn can usually only move one space up, down or to the side at a time."

"Mm." Leona adds, having already shifted into his focus mode and moving one of his pawns two spaces forward.

crunch

"Hey, wait! You just said the pawns can only move one space!" Grim complains between bites in that irritatingly shrill voice of his.

"Pawns can move forward two spaces when it's the first time you're movin' 'em. Next question." Leona explains bluntly while trying to refocus on the board.

"Yeah, what Leona said." The Prefect agrees before picking up his bishop and using it to capture Leona's first pawn, "Next is the bishop that can move as far as it wants, but only diagonally."

Tch, why did he move his pawn there?

crunch

The next few turns involve the moving of pawns, but, just when Leona had them lined up to leave the other man's bishop open to his queen, he quickly moves his bishop back to its original spot.

Is that so?

crunch

Moving another pawn forward to capture one of his opponent's, Leona then finds said pawn captured by the Prefect's knight, "Next, we have the knight, which can only move in an L shape in any direction, but is the only piece that can jump over other pieces in its path."

"Whoa, that's cool!" Grim comments before shoving a whole pawful of chips into his mouth, making a loud crunch that makes Leona's ear twitch in annoyance.

"Herbivore, can ya get the furball outta here?" He says, slightly rubbing his temple while sending his rook out to capture the Prefect's rightmost pawn.

"Don't be mean, Leona. Grim's not hurting anyone." The Prefect responds before using his other knight to capture Leona's first rook.

With a slight smirk, Leona uses his other bishop to capture the knight that was left exposed.

crunch

The Prefect's eyebrow twitches and Leona notices the kind, calm gaze he'd held since his arrival lose its warmth, becoming more calculating.

Looks like the kid gloves just came off.

crunch

The Prefect moves his pawn.

crunch

Leona moves his other rook directly downwards.

crunch

The Prefect captures said rook with his other bishop.

crunch

Leona moves his queen into place--

crunch

The Prefect moves his pawn.

crunch

Leona uses his queen to capture the other bi--

crunch

The Prefect moves his--

crunch

Leona captures--

crunch

The Prefect moves--

crunch

Leona--

CRUNCH

Leona pounds his fist onto the table in great frustration at the unceasing sounds of that DISGRACE of a feline chomping away at his chips with no regard for the people trying to focus, "Will ya just can it, ya little runt?!"

"It wouldn't kill you to be nice for once, you know! The game's almost over, so it doesn't matter much anyway." The Prefect protests, making Leona's eyes widen.

"What...?" He responds before quickly looking back at the board.

Wait.

What?!

Well into his side of the board stands a single white pawn, clear as day, which the Prefect moves into Leona's first rank, setting it up for promotion.

"Well, well. I think I'll be promoting my pawn to a queen." The Prefect says, his face a twisted mirror of the smirk the lion himself had worn not too long ago, "And I do believe that's more or less checkmate!"

Scanning the board again, Leona realizes what the other man means.

He'd never moved his original queen, which left her poised to shut down any attempts to retreat on Leona's part and even if he did escape at first, there's no outrunning two queens with so few pieces left on the board.

He's well and truly trapped.

Begrudgingly accepting his defeat, Leona sighs, "Fine. I surrender."

"Yay!" The Prefect pumps his fist in the air, looking very pleased with himself before reaching into the bowl of chips the little runt had been devouring, finding it empty, "Grim! You know it's rude to eat all of the food meant for everyone! Go to the kitchen and get some more for me and Leona."

The direbeast complies with a disgruntled look on his face as Leona goes over the match in his head to figure out what went wrong.

How did he let himself get cornered like that?

"It's called 'Misdirection', dearest." The Prefect says smugly, no doubt after reading Leona's expression, "When you keep someone's attention on one thing while you're busy doing something else under their nose?"

"Ok, but when did ya 'misdirect' me, as you so eloquently put it?" Leona fires back, rapidly losing patience.

"Well, technically *I* didn't do anything beyond trusting in those powerful beastman ears of yours." He answers in a way that makes everything click in the lion's brain.

"You had the furball eat those chips so loud that it would distract me from the game?" Leona asks in slight disbelief.

"Yes and no. I really wasn't confident that I'd win on a completely level playing field, so when Grim jumped in, I thought I'd play along and see where it would go." He answers matter-of-factly.

Leona can't believe what he's hearing, "So you're tellin' me that you based your strategy around the whims of a CAT?"

"Isn't that a mark of a good leader, though?" The Prefect tilts his head, "Being able to improvise and pull through when things aren't going as planned, I mean."

"Ya say that like it's some failsafe 'Get out of jail free' card." Leona says,

slightly irritated, "Ya came up with some halfway decent plans in the past, but no amount'a 'improvising' would've saved ya if they went south."

"Wh– says the guy who fell for one of those 'halfway decent plans!'" The Prefect counters, hitting the scar in the lion's pride dead-on, "Look down on my strategies all you want, it doesn't change the fact that they worked!"

"Only because ya skated by on dumb luck!" Leona stands up from his chair, thoroughly offended, "At least I have the sense to not leave the crux of the plan up to chance and 'improvise' if it doesn't work!"

"Well, at least it's better than shutting down and giving up once something goes wrong like you did just now! Like you did at the Spelldrive tournament!!!" The Prefect stands up as well, unyielding to the lion's gaze.

"ARE YA CALLIN' ME A QUITTER, YA MAGICLESS NOBODY?!" Leona practically roars, shoving his forehead against the other man's, uncaring of personal space, but the Prefect stands his ground all the same.

"BETTER A MAGICLESS NOBODY THAN A COWARD PRINCE!!!" The Prefect yells while pushing back and maintaining eye contact.

"WHAT'D YA JUST SAY?!"

"YOU HEARD ME!!!"

"Hey, Henchman! Turns out that was the last of those chips, so I made popcorn instead--" Grim says as he walks in on what may well have turned into a fistfight, "U-uh, what're you guys doing...?"

The Prefect quickly breaks away and sits back down, taking a deep breath to calm himself, "Nothing, Grim. Just a little discussion between friends. Right, Leona?"

"...mm." Is his sole response before sitting back down with a huff as well.

“Are ya sure?? You guys looked like ya were ready to throttle each other!” Grim says while cautiously walking forward and placing the bowl of popcorn on the table.

“Don’t worry, Grim.” The Prefect reassures his companion with a headscratch, “We were talking about what strategies we might use for the next match, isn’t that right?”

‘The next match, huh?’ Leona thinks to himself, initially not interested, but eventually deciding to “see where it goes.”

This was his thought after the first match.

And the second.

And the third.

And the four-- oh, screw it. He's having fun.

He can't really explain why, but playing with the Prefect has caused a fog he didn't know was there to lift from his mind.

It's made Leona realize something he should've known from the start.

A pawn has no hope of becoming a king, but with time, effort and some luck, he supposes, it can still become a queen, which is more than enough to win the day.

"Checkmate.”

THE PRINCELY DELINQUENT

By Soru

If Deuce had known he'd be on an errand, so to speak, with Leona Kingscholar, he'd have at least worn something a little less... "homeless-person-style". Well, at least that's what Ace called it. But Leona didn't seem to mind at all, instead combining leopard print with dark jeans and a leather jacket for some... sort of style. And right now, Leona was combing through the shelves of a very pricy store, tossing everything he liked (more leopard print???) onto Deuce as he grumbled about 'not finding what he was looking for'.

"Oi, frosh." Leona starts as Deuce flinches, standing at attention, waiting for him to say something. Leona sighs, cocking a well-maintained eyebrow until Deuce relaxes. "Get something for yourself."

"Oh no, I don't want anything, Leona-senpai." Seems like that was the wrong answer- what is it with so many of the senpais and their need to spend their money like that? "Honest! Everything's pretty expensive here, and I don't really feel comfortable spending that much on clothes..."

Leona thinks for a bit and sighs. "Fine. But I'll be damned if you go home empty-handed today. You're not some damn servant I dragged out with me, get that?" Deuce smiles almost fondly. "Of course, Leona-senpai. Are you done shopping?" Leona nods. "Then let me show you what rich people miss out on most of the time!"

< MeeMaw's Arcade, Clock Town, Queendom of Roses >

"You decided to have me teleport us to a random town in the Queendom of Roses for a rundown, almost closed arcade." Is all Leona says as he watches Deuce move ahead and open the door. "Oh, it's open," Deuce murmurs, ignoring Leona as he shoves the rusty door to the side and bows. "After you, senpai."

The insides of the arcade weren't any better than the outsides. Dusty machines that haven't felt human touch in a long, long time littered the entire area, and the even dustier counter was a dust bomb waiting to happen, in Leona's opinion. "This arcade's super special to me," Deuce starts, bending behind one of the machines to start it, Leona watching it whirr to life.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. It was the place my mom and dad met- or at least, that's what my mom told me. She used to bring me here whenever I needed to make a big decision- sometimes it's always better to have fun, because you might find your solutions there. So even when I fought with other people, friends, or my mom, I just made my way here.

"So why's this place shut?" Leona asks, crossing his arms with a raised eyebrow. "Sounds like it had plenty of business."

"Oh, that's the reason I want to be a policeman- the owners here were lovely, but there were a lot of gangs, many of whom recruited middle school students to harass them for not paying up on time."

"The fuck? And you were part of one of them?" Before Deuce can reply, however, a door from upstairs creaks open, and a young woman comes downstairs, approaching Leona and Deuce. "Ara, Deuce-kun? It's been so long!!" The woman exclaims, tackling Deuce into a bear hug.

"Hey, Ariella-san. It's been a while... haha," Deuce chuckles as he squirms out of her grasp. "What're you doing upstairs though? I thought the O'Hara's sold this place a while back. That's what mom said, at least."

"Managed to get enough money to get this place out of their grimy hands," Ariella sighs. "But since that day, this place has been closed. I left the doors open, of course, for anyone who'd want to come in, but the place has definitely seen better days."

"I'm sorry, Ariella-san," Deuce sighs as Ariella swats his back. "Nonsense! You weren't part of the Ravens, were you?" pause, as Deuce vehemently shakes his head. "Then it's not your fault. Anyway, where are your manners, leaving such a handsome man on the sidelines while you and I talk about ancient history, hmm?"

"Ah, right." Whatever Ariella said seems to bring Deuce out of his spiel of guilt, and he gestures towards Leona. "Ariella-san, this is Leona-senpai."

"Oh, I already knew who he was, I was just waiting for you to be polite." If Deuce could flatline out of embarrassment and save himself Leona's upward and going smirk, he would definitely choose to do that right now. "You do know I read the papers and watch the news, right? Anyway, it's a pleasure to have you visit my parents' arcade. Definitely seen better days, but I could start something up if you want to give anything a try."

Leona surveys the area around him as Deuce attempts (and fails) to look away, before pointing towards a dusty old Wakimann game. "Start that up." Ariella makes a face filled with mild admiration as she dives behind the game for a second before it whirrs to life. "Wakimann, huh? You're a man of culture, I see." Leona shrugs, the emotion in his eyes too dark and heavy for Deuce to properly understand. "My brother used to play Wakimann in the arcade that used to be near RSA. He kept bragging about his high score- some 5000 something something."

Ariella cocks an eyebrow at that piece of information with a small smirk on her face. "Didn't know the future King of the Sunset Savannah liked Wakimann." Leona cocks an eyebrow back. "If this hits the tabloids, I'll

know exactly who to turn into sand," is all he says as he boots up the game and starts playing, as Deuce approaches him.

"Watch and learn, kid." Leona mutters as the game starts up with its shaky tune due to the damaged speakers near Leona's leg, and he ends up with a score of 5400, the highest the arcade's ever seen, much to Deuce's and Ariella's shock. "See? Wuss of a brother couldn't get more, haha." Much to Ariella's shock, Leona hands her a wad of cash as thick as her palm. "Use this to start up the arcade. If you make it a proper business, I might invest in it." Beckoning Deuce out of the arcade, Leona stares at him. "What's next?"

"Huh? Oh, well, it's lunch time, so it's best we head to Lettuce Eat." "Let us what?"

"No, lettuce. Like the vegetable?" Leona groans and attempts to walk off in the other direction as Deuce grabs the back of his shirt, quickly letting go. "Don't worry, senpai, they have meat dishes too."

< Lettuce Eat Foods, Clock Town, Queendom of Roses >

"This the place?" Leona asks Deuce as the junior nods quickly, a quirkily dressed waitress making her way towards Deuce and Leona, bowing.

"Welcome to Lettuce Eat! What can I get for you? And hi Deuce, it's been a while! Not roaming around with those idiots, are we?" the waitress smiles as Deuce shakes his head. "Ahh, that's good! Feel free to take up the same table, I'll get you two the menu right now!"

"Another lady you know, huh." Leona starts as he makes his way to a random empty table, Deuce following him closely. "For all your damn froshness, you've sure got a way with all the anetachi."

"Haha, no way," Deuce flushes as he sits down. "They just know me because 1) the town is small, and almost everyone knows everyone here, and 2) because I used to come here regularly with the gang I was in and my mom. Honestly, with the amount of money I've spent here over several years, my mom could've saved up something for something nicer," Deuce muses wistfully, staring outside as the waitress who approached them at the entrance (Leona never figured out her name, nor did she supply one) hands them each a menu.

"Enjoy! If you need anything, call for Ekatrine!" She cheers before stepping away towards another table as Leona scans the menu for the meatiest dish the restaurant could cook up. "Oi, frosh. What's the meat dish you said I could order?"

"Huh?" Deuce pauses, tilting his head ever-so-slightly to the left, looking like a lost puppy, and Leona feels the mild need to ruffle his hair and feel it through the leather that covers his hands. "Oh, I recommend the Gooey Steak Skewers- I don't why there's 'gooey' in the name, because I've had them before and they're quite nice! Not at all gooey, to be honest. But a bit too fancy for my taste. There's 7 skewers in one order, and they're about a foot long, so it's better if you order only one plate, haha."

"Ekatrine!" Leona calls, one gloved hand in the air, and the restaurant almost quiets- and Deuce's eyes widen as he recognises this power. This is the power of his voice- and this is what Jack-kun was talking about that day at practice, that Leona-senpai has the ability to quiet every room he walks into, has the power sitting right in his palm- and that he will never be acknowledged simply because of the order of his birth. That's a rich person's problem that he's never going to be able to understand, he's afraid. "Two plates of the Gooey Steak Skewers and whatever Deuce wants- put it all on the card." Leona says nonchalantly as he hands Ekatrine a black card. "Hurry the order along as fast as you can, though. Oh, and maybe prepare to pack some for takeout."

"Got it!" Ekatrine smiles as she quickly notes down Deuce's order and all but runs towards the counter to ready the bill and alert the cooks. "Hurry the order along? Why's that?" Deuce asks as he turns to look around him,

blanching as a very familiar mix of dyed hair makes eye contact with him and approaches him rapidly, practically shoving her way through the crowd dividing the two of them. “Oh. How’d you guess, Leona-senpai?”

Leona shrugs. “For all your delinquentness, you ended up looking exactly like your mother. She’s a kind woman,” he adds while she’s still out of earshot. “Treat her kindly, like you said you want to do. And don’t wait till you’re all grown up and earning to do that either.” A pause. “Despite everything they say and do for you, parents aren’t here to stay.”

Deuce nods solemnly as his mother finally reaches his table and grabs him by the collar. “What are you doing here? And hello, how are you?” she asks, directing two separate questions to the two of them. Deuce, to his credit, doesn’t flinch too much, wriggling in his mother’s grasp like a kitten trying to leave its mother’s warmth and explore the world, only to find it cruel and uninviting.

“I was showing him around! I was going to bring him over to our place as well, I swear!” Deuce responds, almost whining as his mother drops him promptly before extending a hand for a shake. “Hello, I’m Dylla Spade, Deuce’s mother. You are?” Leona nods solemnly, receiving the handshake with a calloused hand of his own responding with his name. “Leona Kingscholar.”

“The second Prince?” Dylla seems surprised. “I thought you’d want to eat some place fancier than here,” she starts as Ekatrine hands Leona the packed food. “This place is nothing like what you’ve grown up eating, I know that.” Leona shrugs, refusing to let Dylla take the plastic packet out of his hands. “Well, the tour was from Deuce’s end and his childhood. Smaller towns typically have only one or two fancy restaurants, and children don’t typically enjoy eating there. I didn’t, until I learnt it was protocol.”

“Oh,” Dylla responds with a quick smile, leading the two of them back to her home. “Well then I hope you’ll like whatever I’ve made! Nothing fancy, just lunch.”

< Deuce’s Home, Clock Town, Queendom of Roses >

As Leona expects, Deuce and Dylla’s home is nothing fancy, a typical house created with labours of love instead of being passed down to the first son of the first son of the first son of the first son like his was (well, anyone could get the point. Loads of firstborns with too much authority over many generations.).

The living room has older furniture, likely secondhand or thrifted, and has many roughly designed photo frames of a younger Deuce and Dylla. The rougher frames were clearly painted by Deuce when he was younger, with stickers of cars and animals and birds all over the frame, while some more mature ones display Deuce and Dylla along with another woman with white hair and a smile that seems to reflect in both mother and son- likely a grandmother, then.

“Leona!” Dylla calls, handing him a stack of paper plates and wooden spoons and forks. “Here, hold these, I’ll split the packed food up real quick so you boys can keep eating- if it doesn’t suit your tastes, there’s lunch warmed up on the stove!” Leona nods mutely, unused to her level of enthusiasm over something as simple and normal as lunch, and takes the plates from her hands and waits as Deuce collapses near him with hands still a little moist from washing them.

“Here we go!” Dylla returns with the food warmed up again (not that it had gotten cold or anything, really) and manages to smack Deuce up the head to get him to sit straight while putting the food down. “Feel free to watch anything you boys like, or if you want to see something from his childhood, Leona, just pick up anything you like.”

Nodding again with a slight murmur of thanks, Leona all but ignores Deuce who also silently serves himself and switches on the television to the news channels, trying to ignore Deuce boring holes into his side with the staring he was doing. “You gonna stop drilling holes into me with

your eyes and eat?" Leona asks as Deuce flushes and looks away.

"Sorry, Leona-senpai." Silence looms over the two once again as the elder focuses on the news channel running in front of them, the main story of the evening about some rebellion in some town in Pyroxene that in Deuce's opinion, could have been avoided if everyone had heard everyone out, and- "Then things could be sorted out more peacefully. That's what you're thinking, ain't ya, frosh?" Leona smirks as Deuce nods, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Well, yeah." Deuce starts, awkwardly rubbing the nape of his neck. "I mean, it's a pretty bad situation, isn't it? And it's weird that adults always tell children to talk things out and not fight but that's all that adults ever do." Leona nods, and Deuce takes a deep breath before going on. "Sometimes, people would try to hurt my mom, too. Don't know why, when this town was peaceful, but." Leona nods again.

"My father said once that children must strive to be better than the fake version of their parents than the reality. That it was easier that way. Still don't know what he meant by that, really." Leona shrugs. "To be perfectly honest, I think the real you is fine. Flawed, apologetically honest you. You have a mother and a grandmother, I think, who appreciate you, so don't feel like you have to change to fit anyone else's ideal but your own."

"That's... good advice, Leona-senpai. Thank you," Deuce nodded with wide eyes as Leona waved him off and told him to finish his plate because they had to get back to Night Raven before the sun set. With a quick goodbye (which lasted 10 minutes), Deuce was hastily and unceremoniously tossed onto the doorsteps of his dorm as Leona walked through the mirror leading to Savanaclaw without looking back.

<The Greenhouse, Night Raven College, Two Days Later>

"Oh hey, Leona-senpai." Deuce smiled cordially before making his way towards the lazier senior. "Have you seen Jack anywhere nearby? Last I heard, he was making his way here to give you lunch because Ruggie was stuck with some make-up assignments from Trein."

"Haven't seen 'im," Leona started grouchily, gesturing to the remains of a lunch bag on the ground instead of the typical white tray Ruggie would hand him. "And I got my own fucking lunch today." Deuce wilts at that, opting instead to sit next to the man who snarled at him with little bite. "I'm not in the mood to babysit you today, frosh."

"Who said anything about babysitting, senpai? I just want to eat lunch here, where it's shady, and also that it's the last meat sandwich of the entire cafeteria which I'm pretty sure Ruggie-senpai couldn't get you. That's all." Leona's growls and very much empty threats about retribution and getting sanded were all but music to Deuce's ears as he shoved large portions of the sandwich into his mouth and made himself comfortable next to Leona.

No one bothered commenting about finding Deuce's head resting on Leona's shoulder after most of the classes were done for the day, Deuce's head resting on Leona's shoulder as the latter rested his on the tree behind him, a hand covered by a shirt tucked under a yellow vest enveloping the little freshman who got a little too comfortable with his senior.

Some things were just better left unsaid.

ARTIST LIST
IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Ara

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- aranciangelo
- aranciangelo

Aivy

- aivy-saur
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- aivy-saur

Puo

- puowei
- puowei
- puowei

Ellie

- ellu.ztratez
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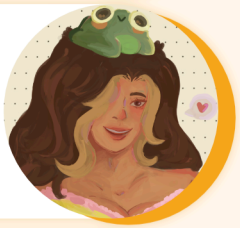

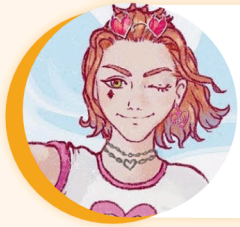

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Nicoli

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- Coli_fluffy
- Nicoliharu

Lemon

- lemonrin_i
- lemonrini
- lemonrin-i

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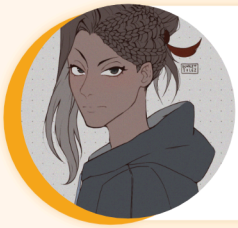
IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE



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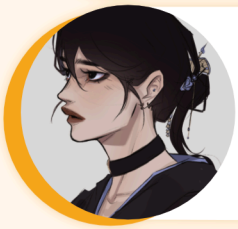

June

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Glidia

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Rei

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Alestra

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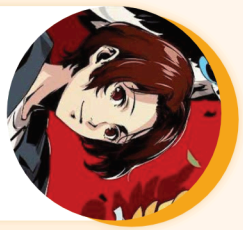
Shu



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Soru

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Ren

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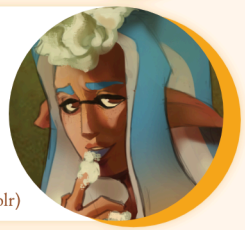

Inky

inkybloom-luv &
ink-in-octo-crater

PFP by *Gatoburr0* (tumblr)

Kouro

Kouro_Kei
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kouro7

Fungi

Sporrifying
-
Fungifanart

COVERS AND

Front Cover

Back Cover

First Page

Last Page

The Prince's Uprising
A Savanaclaw Fanzine